Oral activities in 7th grade English learning materials: An analysis of oral tasks

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Tutkielmassa tarkastellaan suullisia tehtäviä 7.-luokkalaisille suunnatuissa englannin kielen oppimateriaalisarjoissa *On the Go* (SanomaPro), *Scene* (Otava) ja *Focus on English* (Liber). Tutkielman tarkoitus on antaa lukijalle kattava kuvaus siitä, minkälaisia suullisia tehtäviä oppimateriaalit sisältävät, miten suomalaiset ja ruotsalaiset oppimateriaalit vertautuvat toisiinsa sekä miten suomalaiset oppimateriaalit noudattavat vuonna 2014 päivitettyjä perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteita. Seitsemäsluokkalaisten osalta uusi opetussuunnitelma otettiin käyttöön syksyllä 2017.

Tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys on tehtäväpohjainen kielenoppiminen. Viitekehystä taustoitetaan esittelemällä teorioita autenttisten kielenkäyttötilanteiden hyödyntämisestä opetuksessa ja oppimisessa. Tehtäväpohjaisen kielenoppimisen viitekehystä hyödynnetään tunnistettaessa ja eroteltaessa aineiston suullisista tehtävistä niin kutsutut task-tehtävät, joiden avulla kielenoppiminen tapahtuu käyttämällä kieltä autenttisissa tilanteissa muuhun päämäärään kuin kielenoppimiseen. Tehtäviä tarkastellaan muokatulla versiolla Rod Ellisin piirteiden kategorisointimallista (Ellis 2003). Tässä tutkielmassa tehtävien ominaisuuksia tarkastellaan aiempaa tutkimusta yksityiskohtaisemmin kvantitatiiviselta pohjalta. Tutkimuskohteena on 7. luokan oppimateriaalit, sillä edeltävässä tutkimuksessa on pääasiassa tarkasteltu lukion oppimateriaaleja. Lisäksi tutkielmalla pyritään tuomaan uutta näkökulmaa oppimateriaalitutkimukseen ottamalla tarkasteluun mukaan ruotsalainen oppimateriaalisarja. Oppimateriaalien vertailua taustoitetaan katsauksella Suomen ja Ruotsin uusimpiin perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteisiin.

Tutkimus pohjautuu kvantitatiivisiin menetelmiin ja tuloksiin, joita avataan kvalitatiivisen tarkastelun avulla. Aineistosta tutkitaan tehtävien ja muiden suullisten tehtävien määrät ja tehtävätyypit kussakin oppikirjasarjassa. Lisäksi tarkastellaan eri piirteiden vaihtelua ja esiintymistä eri sarjoissa sekä määritellään yleisimmät piirrekombinaatiot. Lopuksi materiaalin tehtäviä verrataan teoriaosiossa esiteltyyn ideaalitehtävään, joka on tätä pro gradu -tutkielmaa varten määritelty tehtävätyyppi.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että suomalaisissa oppimateriaaleissa noin kolmasosa suullisista tehtävistä on task-tehtäviä ja niiden osuus suullisista tehtävistä on keskimäärin sama riippumatta tehtävien lukumäärästä. Suomalaiset oppimateriaalisarjat ovat keskenään melko samanlaiset. Erityisesti *Scene*-oppimateriaalista välittyy uusissa opetussuunnitelman perusteissa korostettu multimodaalisuuden ja kielten rinnakkaiskäytön merkitys kielenoppimisessa. Toisaalta käy ilmi, että suomalaisten oppimateriaalien suullisissa tehtävissä ei erityisesti painotu opetussuunnitelman perusteissa oppimisen tavoitteeksi määriteltyä merkitysneuvotteluun oppimista. Ruotsalaisessa oppimateriaalissa jopa puolet suullisista tehtävistä on task-tehtäviä, joissa harjoitetaan myös merkitysneuvotteluun oppimista.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords

oppimateriaalitutkimus, perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014, suullinen kielitaito, suulliset tehtävät, tehtäväpohjainen kielenoppiminen

Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited

Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information

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List of abbreviations

EFL English as a Foreign Language

CEFR Common European Framework of Reference

CLT Communicative Language Teaching

FNAE Finnish National Agency for Education

FNBE Finnish National Board of Education

L2 A second (or foreign) language

SLA Second language acquisition

TBLT Task-based language learning and teaching

TL Target language

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1. Introduction

The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education was renewed in 2014. One of the aims for language education in the new curriculum is to provide pupils with good oral and communicative skills, as well as confidence in their abilities as foreign language speakers. Special attention is also given to providing the pupils with opportunities to learn and practice their language skills in diverse learning environments that emphasize authenticity (Finnish National Board of Education, FNBE 2016a: 374–375). A report on national general objectives and the distribution of lesson hours in basic education also notes the importance of oral skills as a component of overall linguistic competence (Ministry of Education and Culture 2010: 109, 125). Developing oral proficiency in a foreign language is also highlighted in a report on language skills and employability by the European commission, which states that the demand for oral skills in working life may be higher than that for written skills (European Commission 2015: 30).

This thesis focuses on oral activities, specifically oral tasks, in 7th grade English learning materials. The aim of this thesis is to describe the oral tasks in the material in accordance with task-based language learning, as well as to describe how the tasks reflect principles set by the renewed curriculum. In order to provide a fresh perspective to studies on Finnish learning materials, also a Swedish series was included in the study.

In Sweden, the national curriculum was renewed in 2011 alongside the new education act of 2011. As of since, it has been revised in 2016 and 2017 with additions in the sections regarding the teaching of Swedish and Swedish as a second language in grade 1, as well of digital competence (Skolverket 2016a, Skoverket 2017a). As a result of declining PISA results, the Swedish government and education professionals have emphasized the need for improving education and learning results. According to Skolverket[1], education officials have looked to for example Finland and South-Korea for how Swedish education and curricula should be further developed. Also, Sweden calls for a more holistic approach to learning, which supports creativity and personal growth (Skolverket 2016b).

A study by Härmälä, Huhtanen, and Puukko (2014) shows that Finnish pupils acquire good skills in English oral communication by the end of basic education (Härmälä,

[1] The Swedish equivalent of the Finnish Agency for Education. Skolverket is discussed at greater length in chapter 3.

Huhtanen & Puukko 2014: 61). The authors emphasize that authentic language use and learning environments should be the basis for learning oral skills (*ibid*: 186–187). The results also indicate that the amount of oral production and oral practice that pupils perform in classrooms is only on a satisfactory level, and lessons should offer more opportunities for authentic interaction (*ibid.*).

Learning materials in general have established a firm place in language teaching, as is concluded in a study by Luukka et al. (2008: 64). 98 % of the lower secondary school foreign language teachers that participated in the study chose the alternative 'often' when inquired about their usage of textbooks. The percentage for the use of the workbook was 95 %. The textbook and workbook were also concluded to be the most important source of learning material (*ibid*: 94–96).

While it can be concluded that both the role of oral skills and learning materials is important, studies on oral activities in Finnish learning materials are scarce (Hietala 2013: 39–40). The present study was conducted to expand the research on the topic, to bring new methodology into research on learning materials, as well as to provide a new perspective by also studying materials from Sweden. The renewed national core curriculum and learning materials also prompted to study communicativeness and especially oral activities, as well as the upcoming oral assessment in the matriculation exams (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017: 53).

In reference to the results of the aforementioned research on the demand for oral skills and on the usage of learning materials in language teaching, a study on oral activities in the latest materials with a focus on whether the activities encourage learners to engage in genuine interaction, is called for. It is also important to note that in Finland most learning materials are produced by two publishing houses that dominate the market, SanomaPro and Otava. Therefore, a study conducted on the learning materials of these publishing houses is a good indication of the sort of materials that all Finnish students are introduced to.

The present study focuses on three seventh grade EFL[2] learning materials series *On the Go 1*, *Scene 1*, and *Focus on English 7*. The first two are from Finland, and the third from Sweden. The research questions are as follows:

[2] EFL is an acronym for English as a Foreign Language, and denotes learning English in a formal setting, for example a school, in a country where the language does not have official status (Yule 2010: 187).

1. What is the share of oral activities and oral tasks in the lower secondary school 7th grade learning materials *On the Go 1*, *Scene 1*, and *Focus on English 7*?
2. How can the tasks be described in light of task-based language learning and teaching?
3. What similarities and differences can be found between the oral tasks in the Finnish and Swedish learning materials?
4. In relation to the renewed Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, how similar to an ideal task are the tasks in the material?

The first question involves separating all the oral activities in the data from other activities, and identifying which ones are tasks. Tasks are defined on the basis of Ellis (2003). The second question will be approached with a modified version of the general framework for classifying tasks by Ellis (*ibid*: 271). After classifying the tasks, the data is used to pinpoint which features vary the most and which combinations of features are most common. The study also provides a comparison of the Finnish and Swedish learning materials. The comparison is mostly based on the first two research questions. As previous research on the topic is quite scarce, comparing the results of the present study to other studies is less extensive. To conclude, as a more experimental element to the study, the concept of an 'ideal task' was constructed. The material was scrutinized for such tasks, which were then analyzed further and discussed in light of the renewed core curriculum.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. The theoretical framework chosen for this study is task-based language learning (TBLT). In this thesis, task-based learning refers to the activities in learning materials, as opposed to for example syllabus design (Samuda & Bygate 2008: 195). Before introducing TBLT, a discussion on the Natural Approach and the communicative approach is provided in order to outline the theoretical developments in the field which contained similar elements as TBLT. The third chapter offers a brief introduction to the education authorities and national curricula in Finland and Sweden, as well as other guiding documents. The fourth chapter introduces the materials and methods used in the empirical part of this paper. The results and discussion are provided in the fifth chapter, and the conclusion in the sixth.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework chosen for this study is task-based language learning and teaching (TBLT), which is a combination of both pedagogical and theoretical approaches. To fully understand the development of this framework, one must understand its beginnings: the communicative approach, its sociocultural aspect, and the growing focus on learning through natural, authentic interaction. Therefore, before turning to TBLT, the Natural Approach and the communicative approach are discussed, as they illustrate some of the factors that led to a change from the grammar-translation method into the interactive, communicative and task-based methods in the classrooms of today.

2.1 The concept of competence and the Natural Approach

From the 1960s onwards, the developments in theoretical linguistics as well as ideological changes in the pedagogical field that led to the communicative approach entailed, for example, the notion of actual language use, research on naturalistic learning, and emphasizing the functional side of language, communication. The first development was Noam Chomsky's distinction between *competence* and *performance*, the former referring to a speaker's knowledge of his/her language, and the latter to the actual use of language (Chomsky 1965: 4). From this arose the discussion on competence, specifically *communicative competence*. A sociocultural dimension was included in the competence–performance distinction, as speakers were understood to also acquire skills in register, context-appropriate language, etc. (Hymes 1972).

Communicative competence is hence a broader concept, including the following three components: grammatical competence, contextual or sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence (also called communication strategies)[3] (Canale & Swain 1980: 27). Canale (1983) replaced the term *performance* by *actual communication* to avoid confusion led by Chomsky's (1965) somewhat ambiguous use of the term, and to provide an explicit link between communicative competence and actual competence (Canale 1983: 5).

Another feature gaining prominence in second language learning research was the role of natural interaction and communication in language learning, a central feature in Terrell's

[3] Canale (1983) later redefined communicative competence by adding a fourth component, discourse competence.

Natural Approach (Terrell 1977, Terrell 1982).[4] The basis of the approach is that a second language should be learned in a similar way to how a first language is acquired, that is, not through learning the grammar and structure of the target language, but instead by way of natural acquisition. In this thesis, the Natural Approach is considered only in regard to its communicational aspects, and therefore other central issues, such as the question of error correction and listening comprehension, are excluded from this discussion.

In the Natural Approach, the production of varied output, expression of complex ideas, and communicative competence are some of the primary goals for language acquisition in the beginning stages of learning. For Terrell, communicative competence denotes that

> a student can understand the essential points of what a native speaker says to him in *a real communicative situation* and can respond in such a way that the native speaker interprets the response with little or no effort and without errors that are so distracting that they interfere drastically with communication. (Terrell 1977: 326, emphasis added).

Terrell (1977) also notes that the majority of difficulties in interpreting a learner's message stem from the lack of practicing language skills in a communicative context. While previous language teaching methods entailed memorizing drills and grammar rules, the Natural Approach emphasized authentic communication in the target language as well as communicative activities. That is, while grammar is acknowledged as an essential part of a language syllabus, it should be learned alongside other skills and not as the central focus with pupils learning one grammar rule at a time.

If learners learn the structure of their second language through drills and exercises, to which they only receive feedback on form, no attention is paid to *content and meaningful language use*, which are central issues in the Natural Approach (Terrell 1977). For example, Terrell offers an example of a situation where communication and language use is unnatural as a result of emphasizing correctness of form: A learner is required to answer a question, such as "Where is the book", and the learner is assumed to provide an error-free, complete sentence, such as "The book is on the table". Were the situation more natural, one might simply reply "It's on the table" or "On the table" (*ibid*: 334).

[4] Also involved in the development of the Natural Approach was Stephen Krashen (cf. Krashen & Terrell 1983). In this thesis, the Natural Approach is discussed primarily in its original form, presented by Terrell in 1977 and 1982.

Terrell (1977: 329–332) suggests three guiding principles for language acquisition: the use of activities which promote acquisition instead of learning[5], the use of indirect error correction, and allowing the pupils to respond either in their native language or in the target language, or else a mixture of both. The first principle, the use of a certain type of activity or task, is central to this thesis. Terrell (1982: 122) emphasizes activities that foster acquisition (or activities that promote *natural* picking up of language), and claims that acquisition is indispensable for all learners. According to Terrell, activities should provide learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful communication (*ibid.*).

Krashen and Terrell (1983: 55) note that "Language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning". They suggest making use of oral acquisition activities which are not only meaningful and communicative, but also *interesting* to the learner. Such activities may be problem-solving activities, role-play and dialogues, all of which are employed in order to support the development of oral skills (*ibid*: 100–127).

The Natural Approach was heavily criticized for its de-emphasis of instruction in language teaching and its reliance on activities that, according to the approach, should foster acquisition. For example, McLaughlin (1978) states that grammar instruction is essential for language learning, as in his view automatic processes develop as a result of explicit instruction, that is, providing learners with an explicit description of what is being learned. McLaughlin does, however, note that the development towards more communicative classrooms is to be encouraged (McLaughlin 1978: 328). Harley and Swain (1984) remark that while immersion-educated learners following a natural approach syllabus develop strong receptive skills, their production skills may fall short.

A more recent meta-analysis of L2 instruction studies by Norris and Ortega indicates that instruction, especially grammar instruction and rule explanation, is a substantial advantage to the learner, but it is more difficult to determine how much more effective instruction is compared to language exposure and simple communication (Norris & Ortega 2000: 480–483). To conclude, the Natural Approach can be seen to have had an impact on developing language teaching into more communicative-based teaching, in which the focus is directed to content and meaningful language use. However, it was also

[5] The term *acquisition* refers to more implicit or informal learning (such as learning a first language), whereas *learning* is traditionally thought to denote more explicit and formal learning, such as in a classroom (Yule 2010: 187). The terms are not discussed further in this thesis.

indicated that simple immersion and utilizing solely communicative events in language teaching are insufficient for developing proficiency in a foreign language, and that for example grammar instruction is always beneficial, if not vital, for learners.

2.2 The communicative approach

In this thesis, the discussion of the communicative approach is limited to the classification of competences in the approach and to a brief discussion of its pedagogical perspectives on the basis of articles by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). This subsection ends with a final note on another approach, communicative language teaching (CLT), which also stems from the communicative approach and is similar to task-based language learning, the theoretical framework discussed in the following section.

From 1980 onwards the communicative approach gained more prominence. It was supported by the growing demand for a language learning syllabus that offered pupils practical skills in languages, for example in skills or *functions*, such as 'requesting', 'demanding' or 'thanking', and using these skills in communicative activities, such as role-play and pair work. This communicative (or communication-based) approach to language teaching was called the 'functional-notional' syllabus model (Mitchell 1994: 35–36). The goal of the approach was to provide pupils with skills to use the target language in authentic communication situations, instead of having to rely on linguistic knowledge learned through drills and grammar teaching (Canale 1983: 15).

It is important to notice that the communicative approach was not a syllabus constructed on solely communicative tasks. As Canale and Swain point out, especially in the first year of learning the target language, the lack of focus on grammatical features of the target language may have a negative effect on learning (Canale & Swain 1980: 32, also emphasized in Herschensohn 1990). Canale and Swain (1980: 27) propose that when taking a communicative approach to teaching, learners should also acquire knowledge of the target language culture. The tasks and interaction that learners engage in should also be as meaningful and genuine as possible. Nevertheless, the focus of the communicative approach was *what* the pupils should learn (i.e. communicative functions), whereas other approaches, such as the Natural Approach introduced above, was an attempt to discover *how* languages are learned best, e.g. by immersion in a natural context (Littlewood 2014: 351).

In the communicative approach, *communicative competence* refers to a learner's underlying knowledge of the language and the ability to communicate in the language, whereas *actual competence* refers to the learner's actual skills and performance in concrete situations (Canale 1983: 5). The communicative approach proposes a framework including at minimum four dimensions to a speaker's communicative competence in a language: grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence, of which the last was added by Canale in 1983 (*ibid*: 9).[6] These competences are equally relevant to a learner's communicative competence, and none of them should be overemphasized at the expense of another. It is important to note that in this approach, communication is not restricted to verbal spoken language, but consists also of non-verbal symbols, written language, as well as both production and comprehension (Canale & Swain 1980: 29).

The first competence dimension, grammatical competence, refers to knowledge of lexical items as well as of the phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of the target language. A grammatical perspective on language learning is essential, as it provides learners with skills in determining the accuracy and literal meaning of utterances, as well as the skills to produce such utterances independently (Canale & Swain 1980: 29–30).

Sociolinguistic competence includes both sociocultural rules and rules of discourse. The former refers to the expression and production of communicative functions which are appropriate within the sociocultural context (Canale & Swain 1980: 30). Rules of discourse refer to the cohesion and coherence of utterances. Canale later (1983: 7) separated discourse competence from sociolinguistic competence. Canale defines discourse competence as the skill to "combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres" (*ibid*: 9).

Strategic competence refers to the learner's skills in compensating for communication breakdowns. Communication strategies can be verbal or non-verbal, and they can stem from either performance variables, such as the inability to recall a specific term or grammatical form, or insufficient competence. Communication strategies may also be used to ease interaction by for example paraphrasing when the intended term or grammatical form is difficult to recall (Canale 1983: 10–11). Strategies are most likely acquired through *meaningful conversation* and *authentic interaction* (*ibid*: 30–31).

[6] Canale notes that communicative competence may also include systems of knowledge such as world knowledge and other influential factors, for example personality (Canale 1983: 6).

The description of competences provides the basis for the communicative approach, but the framework also provides tools for practical teaching methodology. To highlight the advantages of the communicative approach, Canale and Swain (1980: 32–33) refer to the possible rise in motivation that learners may experience when engaging in meaningful communication. They propose that constraining language learning to a classroom context in which the central focus is accuracy and grammatical competence may leave pupils with a feeling of communicative incompetence, which may have a negative impact on the pupils' willingness to interact in the target language. As for teaching methodology, also emphasized in the approach is the importance of using classroom activities that feel genuine and are goal-oriented. In addition to real-life communicative activities, genuine interaction also entails for example unpredictable utterances (*ibid.*).

If pupils are exposed only to predetermined drills[7], pupils may perceive a communicative situation to compose of only complete sentences which are grammatically correct, and may feel inadequately skilled in facing a possible communicative breakdown when exposed to a genuine communicative situation. Therefore, according to Canale and Swain (1980: 33–34), teachers should act as instigators of meaningful communication. That is, teachers should strive to engage the pupils in communicative situations in which they can develop their skills.

Canale (1983: 18–19) summarizes the five key principles that guide a communicative approach to second language learning, of which two principles are relevant for specifically this thesis: communication needs and meaningful and realistic interaction.[8] Communication needs refer to how the pupils' needs and interests are reflected in the approach. These needs should be considered from the perspective of each competence, such as the appropriate grammatical accuracy as set by a specific communicative situation. Canale also places an emphasis on exposing learners to such language varieties that they may encounter in genuine communicative situations, as well as on familiarizing learners with the minimum level of competence required of them when interacting with different groups of interlocutors. Meaningful and realistic interaction refers to exposing learners to meaningful communicative interaction with highly proficient speakers of the

[7] As in the Audiolingual method, cf. Brown 1994: 70–71.
[8] The other three principles concern the coverage of competence areas, the learner's native language skills and a curriculum-wide approach.

target language, which in turn supports the development of skills in handling genuine communicative situations (*ibid.*).

A critical view of the framework is provided by for example Skehan (1998). Skehan acknowledges that when compared to the works by Chomsky (1965) and Hymes (1972), the framework is much further developed in terms of describing learners' underlying competence. It also allows flexibility across contexts: different competences play different, more or less significant roles depending on the context at hand. However, the framework is less applicable for predicting performance, nor can it be easily generalized across different contexts. According to Skehan, the underlying competences introduced above are difficult to connect with actual performance. In addition, Skehan notes that the framework does not provide tools for determining which competences are needed in specific contexts, and which competences, or which combination of competences, function best in a specific context (Skehan 1998: 158–159). More developed and detailed modifications of the original framework are provided by for example Bachman and Palmer (1996) and Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995).

The issue of determining a precise *pedagogical basis* for communicative approaches, such as communicative language teaching (CLT), has been raised by multiple researchers. Communicative language teaching (CLT) is an approach related to, or a further developed version of the communicative approach (Littlewood 2014: 350–352). The terms are used interchangeably in for example Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1997) and Bax (2003). Especially in the early approaches, the basis of teaching may simply have been learning through communicative events, rendering the content of a communicative syllabus vague (Celce-Murcia et al. 1997: 142–146). Researchers have also questioned whether a syllabus based simply on natural communication and participating in communicative events is sufficient for learners' linguistic competence to develop, and concerns have been raised relating to the methods teachers were using to support the learning of linguistic forms (*ibid.*). An even more critical view on CLT is provided by Bax (2003), who argues that the significance of the learning context is not recognized in CLT, and introduces in turn another approach, the Context Approach. Bax's main claim is that making use of a communicative approach may not be the most advantageous choice in all contexts, but different contexts (depending on for example the culture and the pupils), may require the use of other approaches (Bax 2003, also discussed in Kumaradivelu 2006: 72–73).

As a last note on communicative approaches, it is important to note the relationship between CLT and task-based learning and teaching (TBLT), the theory discussed in the following section. Nunan (2004) states that while CLT can be considered a theoretical approach, TBLT provides concrete tools for teaching methodology and syllabus design. Ellis (2003: 30–31) argues that TBLT is a strong version of CLT, and states that TBLT is a framework that provides "the basis for an entire language curriculum". However, for example Kumaradivelu (2006: 64) raises the question of whether differences between CLT and TBLT really exist, or whether TBLT is just new terminology for the previous prominent approach to language learning. *Communicative* language teaching developed into an approach which emphasized *tasks*. A similar opinion is echoed in Littlewood (2014: 349–350): TBLT may just be "a development within CLT", in which tasks play a central role.

In regard to this thesis, it is worth restating and stressing the fact that for the most part, the previously discussed theories and pedagogical methods all place an emphasis on using language in a context, meaningful language use, and genuine communication. The aforementioned concepts are all ones that repeatedly resurface in the following section on TBLT, as well as in the Finnish core curriculum introduced in chapter 3.

2.3 Task-based language learning and teaching

The aforementioned theories, approaches and methods have all had an effect on the framework of choice in this study: task-based language learning and teaching (TBLT).[9] TBLT began to gain prominence in the late 1980s, due especially to Prabhu's Communicational Language Teaching Project (Prabhu 1987, see also Ellis 2012: 196). The primary goal of TBLT is to connect three variables: a certain learning environment (tasks), the communicative behavior (task-based L2 performance) elicited by the learning environment, and SLA (task-based L2 learning) (Eckerth 2008: 13–14).[10]

Task-based language teaching is based on three core principles: it is holistic, learner-driven, and communication-based instruction. 'Holistic' refers to language being treated as discourse in use, not as a myriad of discourse elements. 'Learner-driven' specifies that the learning context and discourse is learner-initiated, and 'communication-based' refers

[9] TBLT is used to refer to the terms 'task-based language teaching', 'task-based language learning' and 'task-based language learning and teaching', which are used interchangeably in this thesis.
[10] The acronyms SLA and L2 refer to second language acquisition and a second (or foreign) language, respectively.

to language instruction that focuses on conveying and understanding meanings (Ellis 2012: 196–197). That is, TBLT is based on the notion that learners can acquire a language by completing tasks with a similar likelihood as learning by focusing on specific language functions or forms (Harmer 2007: 71). Harmer presents two views on the approach in which tasks form the basis of a syllabus. The difference between views occurs in the role of tasks: According to some, tasks guide the acquisition of language, whereas the other view is that before completing tasks, learners should be provided with the (linguistic) means to perform the tasks (Harmer 2007: 73).

According to Ellis (2009: 230–231), there are at least three distinctive approaches to TBLT: Long (1985), Skehan (1998) and Ellis (2003), the last of which is made use of in this thesis. It was chosen due to its extensive inclusion of different approaches to task classification, as well as it being the most recent of the three approaches. That is, while other approaches take a specific aspect to task-based learning, such as Skehan's cognitive approach (1998), Ellis's approach offers a more general one that is more multidisciplinary and is not as restricted by a specific research field. The approaches by Long (1985) and Skehan (1998) are not discussed further in this thesis.

This section focuses on the definitions of a task and task features. The main emphasis is on tasks that support the development of oral skills. The following subsections discuss the definitions, criteria, and principles of tasks, as well as provide a classification for tasks. Also provided is a discussion on oral tasks and the concept of an 'ideal task', which is based on the Finnish core curriculum.

2.3.1 Terminology: activities, tasks, and exercises

In this thesis, *activities* is used as an umbrella term to refer to all activities (tasks, exercises, etc.), especially in regard to the study presented in this thesis. This choice was made as an effort to bring consistency and cohesion to studies regarding learning materials and oral tasks, as similar terminology was also used in Hietala (2013), a previous MA thesis on oral activities in learning materials. In this thesis, activity types are discussed in relation to oral activities and oral tasks. Hietala also included *exercises* and *drills* in her study and terminology, which was based on Ellis (2003) and Wong and VanPatten (2003: 403–406). The empirical study of this thesis tries to replicate some of the methods, especially those regarding categorizing activity types, used in the studies by Hietala (2013) and Salminen (2013), even though the theoretical background and aims of

these studies differ. The definitions are compared to the study by Hietala (2013), as she discusses the terms more extensively in her study.[11]

The importance of providing specific definitions for the aforementioned terms, especially tasks and exercises, can be demonstrated with a discussion in Ellis (2003: 2–5). The discussion exemplifies the problems in using a multitude of definitions in addition to ambiguous, overlapping terms in day-to-day situations for example for the terms 'task' and 'exercise'. The following descriptions and definitions of exercises and tasks are provided for the following reasons: First, in order to provide further reasoning for the choice to use *activity* as an umbrella term (and not for example 'exercise'), and second, to provide the reader with an understanding of the clear distinction between tasks and exercises.

Hietala (2013) refers to definitions presented in Ellis (2003) and Widdowson (1998) to distinguish tasks from exercises. Contrary to tasks, exercises make use of intentional learning[12] and are form-focused: While tasks have an outcome other than mere language use or the learning of a linguistic form, the focus of exercises is to practice language use or to learn a specific form. This difference is exemplified in figures 1 and 2 on pages 15 and 16. Hietala also notes that in order to complete an exercise, such as a 'fill in the blanks' exercise, the learner must have knowledge of specific linguistic forms or vocabulary, whereas with tasks, language skills develop alongside language use. Additionally, while meaningful and contextual use of language is a key feature of tasks, exercises do not as such require a context or link to real-life situations (Hietala 2013: 28). Now that a description of exercises has been provided, the next subsection includes a more detailed description of tasks and a comparison of tasks and exercises.

2.3.2 Defining tasks

It is important to note that while tasks are not simply activities with a focus on form (i.e. exercises), they are neither activities in which conveying meaning is of *sole* importance. Earlier definitions, for example by Long (1985: 89), argue that tasks should resemble functions, for example making reservations at a hotel or giving directions. Definitions

[11]Salminen (2013) does not provide a discussion on this terminology, and uses the terms 'task' and 'exercise' synonymously. Salminen does, however, distinguish drills from exercises in her discussion (Salminen 2013: 51). These studies are discussed more extensively in section 2.4.

[12] In foreign language acquisition and learning, one can make a distinction between incidental and intentional learning: The former refers to learning a feature of language (words, grammar rules) while engaging in another activity, such as learning new vocabulary by reading books. The latter refers to the targeted learning of specific features, such as the formation of indirect speech (Hulstijn 2003:349).

later developed from mere functions to concrete activities. For example, Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001) define a task as "an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (Bygate, Skehan & Swain 2001: 11).

Ellis (2003: 16) outlines that a task is a 'workplan'[13] for language use: a plan for learner activity, in which the learner uses language to achieve a certain outcome. The language is either directly or indirectly related to how language is used in real life. Conveying meaning is emphasized, and the task can be either productive or receptive, oral or written. Nunan defines tasks as classroom work in which students interact in the target language. The primary focus is on conveying meaning, but not without making use of grammatical knowledge (Nunan 2004: 4). It can be concluded that overall, most definitions emphasize meaningful use of language to achieve an outcome other than simply learning a specific feature of the target language.

On account of the multiple definitions for tasks, as well as the different roles tasks hold in different approaches, Kumaradivelu (2006: 64–66) questions whether task-based language teaching can truly be recognized as an approach with one, specific method. Also Seedhouse has argued that as a task does not refer to any specific construct, it is inadvisable to ground either a language teaching syllabus or research on the sole basis of TBLT, until a valid construct for 'task' is found (Seedhouse 2005).

To conclude, a basis for a language program or syllabus is provided by Ellis (Ellis 2009: 223), who summarizes the key principles of tasks:

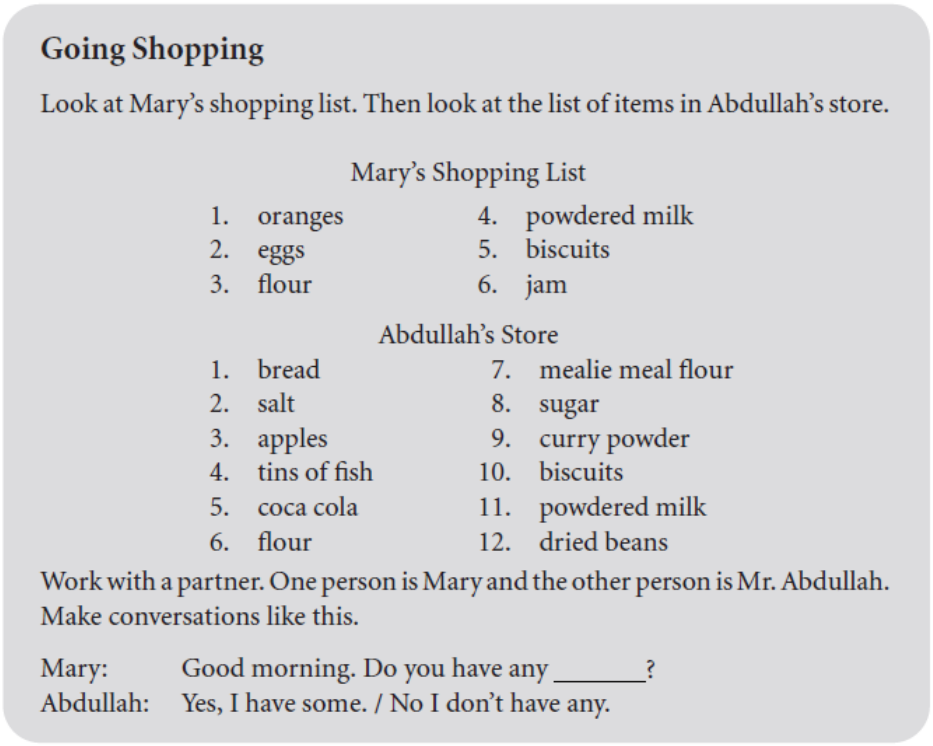
1. The primary focus should be on meaning.
2. Each task should be built around some sort of 'gap' which the students need to fill.
3. Learners should make use of their own linguistic and non-linguistic skills.
4. Tasks should have a specifically defined outcome, in which language functions only as the means for achieving that goal. The simple use of language should never be the goal of a task.

Now that a definition for tasks has been established, a more illustrative comparison of tasks and exercises can be provided. As mentioned in subsection 2.3.1, exercises are usually form-focused, i.e. the intended outcome can be for example learning a specific

[13] Tasks have been conceptualized according to two perspectives by for example Breen (1989): task-as-workplan and task-in-process, in which the former refers to a predesigned task which may or may not result in the intended outcome, and the latter to how and to which outcome the task is truly performed and completed (Breen 1989: 188; Seedhouse 2005: 535). This distinction is not discussed further in this thesis, as it is most relevant in lesson planning and not in individual tasks.

linguistic form or simply language use (Ellis 2003: 3). Another aspect to exercises is the participants' role: exercises place participants in the role of a learner and learning is intentional, as the goal of an exercise is primarily the acquisition of a specific form. To complete an exercise, the learners must already be in possession of the linguistic skills required by the exercise (*ibid.*) It is also important to note that exercises do not necessarily require meaningful language use, as exercises may simply consist of for example 'fill in the gap' types of activities. In this case, the learner may only need to provide a specific linguistic form with no recognition of the semantic dimension of the exercise (Ellis 2003: 5).

As an example, Ellis (2012) presents the activity presented in figure 1 below, which can be categorized as an exercise, and figure 2 on the following page, which satisfies the aforementioned criteria of a task.



Going Shopping

Look at Mary's shopping list. Then look at the list of items in Abdullah's store.

Mary's Shopping List

1. oranges
2. eggs
3. flour
4. powdered milk
5. biscuits
6. jam

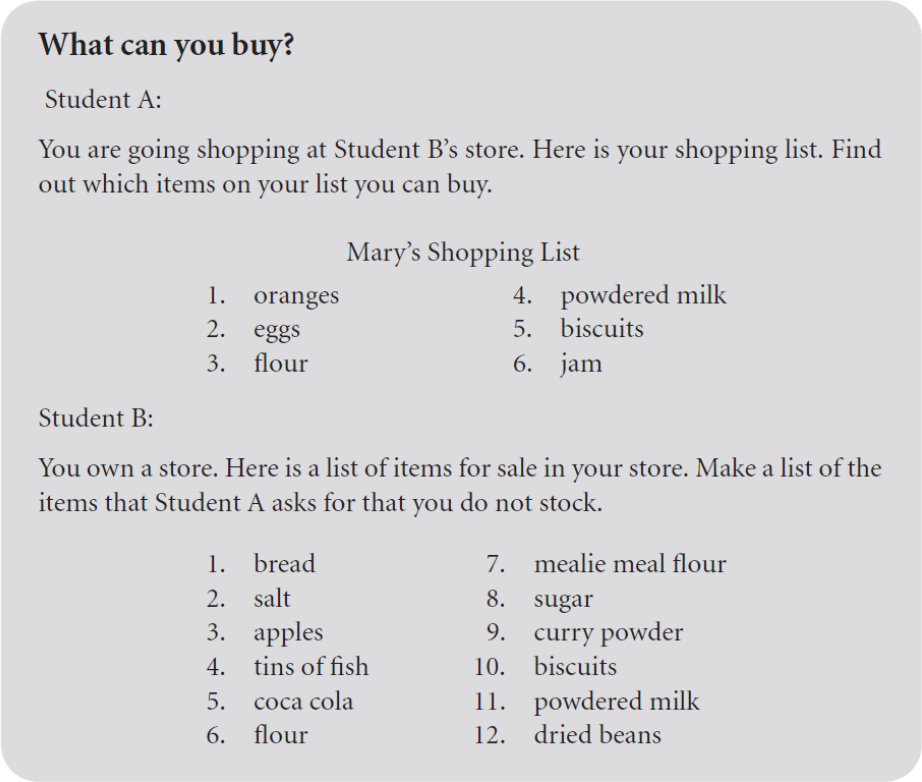
Abdullah's Store

1. bread
2. salt
3. apples
4. tins of fish
5. coca cola
6. flour
7. mealie meal flour
8. sugar
9. curry powder
10. biscuits
11. powdered milk
12. dried beans

Work with a partner. One person is Mary and the other person is Mr. Abdullah. Make conversations like this.

Mary: Good morning. Do you have any _____?
Abdullah: Yes, I have some. / No I don't have any.

Figure 1. An example of an activity which does not satisfy the criteria of a task (Ellis 2012: 199).



What can you buy?

Student A:

You are going shopping at Student B's store. Here is your shopping list. Find out which items on your list you can buy.

Mary's Shopping List

1. oranges
2. eggs
3. flour
4. powdered milk
5. biscuits
6. jam

Student B:

You own a store. Here is a list of items for sale in your store. Make a list of the items that Student A asks for that you do not stock.

1. bread
2. salt
3. apples
4. tins of fish
5. coca cola
6. flour
7. mealie meal flour
8. sugar
9. curry powder
10. biscuits
11. powdered milk
12. dried beans

Figure 2. An example of a task which satisfies the criteria of a task (Ellis 2012: 199).

In order to complete the *exercise* in figure 1, learners need to understand the vocabulary presented in the exercise and have linguistic knowledge about the usage of *some* or *any* with affirmative and negative clauses. The learning is intentional, and the outcome of the exercise is gaining practice in an aspect of the language system. In order to complete the *task* in figure 2, learners must engage in meaningful communication to fill an information gap (which items the store sells and which it does not). Learners make use of their own linguistic skills and are not given for example predetermined phrases or expressions to use in order to complete the task. The learners reach an outcome other than purely linguistic (for example, does the shop have item x), and not for example learning a specific grammatical form.

2.3.3 Determining an activity as a task

As the definition for tasks varies, it is good to make use of yet another description of tasks when determining and evaluating whether a given activity can be identified as a task. Ellis (2003: 9–10) lists six criterial features of a task:

1. A task is a workplan.
2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.
3. A task involves real-world processes of language use.
4. A task can involve any of the four language skills.

5. A task engages cognitive processes.
6. A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome. (*ibid.)*

In the first criterion, it is important to note the fact that while tasks have a more or less predetermined outline, they can adapt to the learning environment: While a teacher may plan a learner activity with a specific outcome in mind, the task may transform in the learning process and may result in an outcome different to what the teacher intended.

The second criterion refers to a feature already discussed above: the goal-oriented nature of a task which gives rise to meaningful and authentic language use. In the third criterion, it is noteworthy that tasks themselves may be activities directly related to real-world communicative events, such as helping an interlocutor complete an utterance by suggesting terms relating to the topic of the utterance, or they can be somewhat more artificial, such as a discussion task in a school book in which learners discuss similarities and differences between a set of pictures. That is, the nature of the task may be artificial, but the processes of language use (for example asking questions) demanded by the task in question must reflect processes that occur also in genuine communication (Ellis 2003: 9–10).

The fourth criterion refers to productive and receptive language skills. The fifth specifies that tasks require cognitive processes such as classifying, ordering, and evaluating information. The sixth ensures that a method exists for evaluating whether a learner has completed the task in question – that is, the task has resulted in the intended outcome. The features presented here can be made use of when evaluating whether activities conform to TBLT (Ellis 2003: 10). It is important to note that none of the features determine the linguistic form a learner should use to complete the task. While tasks may provide constraints, the learners themselves choose which linguistic form functions best – a key feature of the approach itself (Willis & Willis 2001: 174).

Ellis also provides other ways of describing tasks. For example, tasks can be focused or unfocused, that is, they can focus on specific linguistic features or provide opportunities for general (communicative) language usage. Tasks can also be either “input-providing” or “output-prompting”, which refers to whether a task demands receptive or productive skills, or an integration of both (Ellis 2009: 223–224). Other variables in task design are task complexity, and whether a task is ‘open’ or ‘closed’, referring to whether there are multiple ways to complete the task, or whether there is only one or a limited amount of

ways (Ellis 2012: 200). The discussion now turns to the final aspect of TBLT discussed in this thesis: task classification.

2.3.4 Task classification

An example of an early classification of tasks is provided by Prabhu, who divided meaning-focused classroom activities into three categories: information-gap activities, reasoning-gap activities, and opinion-gap activities (Prabhu 1987: 46–47). The first refers to the transfer of information, for example in pair work in which each member has a portion of the total information, and the pair works together to fill one another's information-gaps. The second is similar to the first, but involves also deriving new information from given information. The last refers to identifying and expressing one's own personal preference or attitude. Important to note in Prabhu's classification is the notion of negotiation of meaning, which he sees as an essential part of successful task completion (*ibid.*).

Since Prahbu's work in 1987, a vast array of different task classifications has emerged (Ellis 2003: 210). These include similar gap tasks as Prabhu (1987) presented, but may have been given new terminology, such as split versus shared information tasks. Tasks have also been labelled in reference to what they require of the learner, such as role-play tasks, or according to which of the four language skills they focus on, for example a speaking task. Classification is also conducted on the basis of the sort of discourse they are intended to elicit, such as a descriptive task. As Ellis states: "it is clear that there is currently no accepted single typology of tasks, nor is there any consensus regarding the choice of organizing principle for constructing such a typology" (Ellis 2003: 216).

The task classification presented in this thesis is a framework which draws on four separate approaches: a pedagogic, rhetorical, cognitive and psycholinguistic approach, constructed by Ellis (2003: 210–211). This framework was chosen on account of its flexibility – it is easily adjusted and simplified to meet the needs of the empirical part of this thesis, which focuses on oral tasks. The classification has four design features: input, conditions, processes, and outcomes. Each design feature has its own key dimensions, which describe for example whether the information configuration is split or shared between the participants, whether the task is monologic or dialogic, and whether the outcome of the task is open or closed. The framework was slightly modified for the

purposes of the empirical part of this thesis, and is hence introduced in the methods chapter of this thesis in subsection 4.2.1.

2.3.5 The ideal task

For the purposes of the empirical part of this thesis, introduced in this subsection is the concept of an *ideal task*. One of the aims of this thesis is to study how Finnish learning materials adhere to the principles of the renewed Finnish curriculum. Therefore, the ideal task is defined on the basis of the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 (FNBE 2016a), which is introduced more extensively in subsection 3.2. The following excerpts from the curriculum are ones that were regarded as most applicable for task categorization.

The Finnish national core curriculum provides a definition for the concept of learning.

> Language, physical elements and the use of different senses are essential for thinking and learning. --- the joy of learning and creative activities promote learning and inspire the pupils to develop their competence. Learning takes place in interaction with other pupils----" (FNBE 2016a: 17).

This is merely a small part of a much wider definition for learning. On the other hand, the transversal competences that steer basic education include the competence *Thinking and learning to learn*, which is further elaborated as follows:

> [p]upils are guided to use information independently and in interaction with others for problem-solving, argumentation, reasoning, drawing of conclusions and invention (FNBE 2016a: 21).

In reference to another transversal competence, *Cultural competence, interaction and self-expression*

> [pupils] are encouraged to use even limited language skills to interact and express themselves --- School work encourages the use of imagination and creativity" (FNBE 2016a*:* 22–23).

Also, in relation to multiliteracy, the fourth transversal competence, pupils should learn to obtain and produce information in different modes or media. Different modes refer to for example making use of different senses (e.g. kinesthetic presentation of information) and different media, for example producing visual or written output alongside audio (oral) output (*ibid:* 23–24).[14]

[14] For a description of *multiliteracy,* see FNBE 2016a: 23–24.

What the previous excerpts emphasize is the use of tasks that engage pupils in diverse cognitive processes and that involve multimodal input and output media in order to support the development of multiliteracy. Also learning in interaction (or through interactive tasks) is encouraged, as well the use of tasks that allow for creativity. In addition, instruction can make use of the parallel use different languages in order to support language learning and language awareness (FNBE 2016a: 375).

As to the objectives of instruction in the A syllabus in English in grades 7–9, it is stated in objectives 4, 5, and 6 that instruction is to

> guide the pupil towards positive interaction where delivering the message is most important
>
> encourage the pupil to participate in discussions
>
> support the pupil's initiative in communicating, using compensation, and negotiating meaning (FNBE 2016a: 376).

It is further elaborated that

> pupils make observations and practice many different interactive situations using different communication channels --- The pupils are guided to use their language skills confidently. Abundant practice in communication supports the development of the pupils' language proficiency (FNBE 2016a: 377).

It is clear that for the most part, the aforementioned characteristics are in line with the criteria for tasks in general. For example, the objective of language teaching is not as such that pupils acquire knowledge of English, but instead that they are able to *convey messages and meanings* – in English or in an English-speaking context. That is, pupils may also make use of for example pictures or other languages alongside English in order to avoid communicational breakdowns.

In terms of task classification, the characteristics indicate that the following task features promote the concept of learning introduced in the curriculum. A description or objective in the curriculum that is connected to the feature(s) in question is placed in brackets. Input and output should be pictorial, oral, and written (*multiliteracy*), and the organization of the task is loose (*imagination and creativity*). The information is shared between the participants in order to prevent simple exchanging of information and to promote discussion. Interaction is required, and the task should engage the pupil in all the cognitive processes of the classification (*thinking and learning to learn*). The outcome should be open and the discourse extended (*imagination and creativity*). The interactant relationship

should be two-way to support pupils' skills in negotiating meaning, and as interaction and communication are encouraged, the discourse mode is set as dialogic.

To demonstrate how these decisions were made when determining the final feature combination of an ideal task, the organization and outcome of the task are used as examples. To begin with, supporting learner autonomy and development of creativity denotes, for example, providing the learner with more freedom in choosing how and at what point the task is completed. Therefore, the organization should be loose and the outcome open and extended. Also, the more flexible the materials, the more they enable the learner to use them creatively. For example, were the task to only provide the learner with predetermined questions, the organization of the task would be tight, and there would be much less room for an open outcome.

Therefore, the ideal task includes the following features: The input and output are pictorial, oral, and written. The task is loose and the information is shared. The interactant relationship is two-way and interaction is required. In order to promote argumentation, the task engages in both (or at least one) orientations, convergence and divergence. Also, all cognitive processes are required to complete the task. The discourse is dialogic and extended, and the outcome is open.

Examples of ideal tasks found in the data are given in the results and discussion sections of this thesis. The individual features of the classification are explained thoroughly in subsection 4.2.1.

2.3.6 Oral activities

The focus in this thesis is on oral activities, specifically oral tasks. In this thesis *oral* refers to spoken production and interaction. A wide array of terms exist for oral activities, which can be exemplified for example by listing some of the terms that appear in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR)[15]: Oral activities are referred to as communicative activities, communicative tasks, and oral production (speaking) activities (Council of Europe 2001: 25, 57–58). Also for example Harmer uses the term speaking activities, and describes six categories of speaking activity: acting from a script, communication games, discussion, prepared talks, questionnaires, and simulation and role-play (Harmer 2007: 348–353). It can be inferred from Harmer's categorization that speaking activities may be done as individual work or as pair or group work. A similar

[15] A brief review of the CEFR is provided in chapter 3.

distinction is made in the CEFR, which divides speaking into spoken interaction and spoken production (Council of Europe 2001: 26).

Yet another similar distinction between interactional and transactional use of spoken language is made by Brown and Yule (1983: 10–11). Transactional use refers to the transfer of information, whereas the interactional use of language functions as the basis for establishing and maintaining social relationships (*ibid.).*

Hildén makes a distinction between spoken communication skills and oral skills (Hildén 2000: 172–173). The former refers to a communicational situation in which the speaker produces, perceives, or conveys spoken language, and which does not necessarily include interaction. For example, leaving a message on the phone requires spoken skills, but the receiver of the message hears what is communicated only after the message is left. Spoken communication skills entail linguistic skills, functional skills, and strategic skills. Oral skills, on the other hand, are a component of spoken communication skills, and denote the knowledge and skills in a specific language that are made use of when engaging in a communicational situation which may be either interactional or transactional (i.e. non-interactional). To engage in communication, the participant must have sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and linguistic skills in the language in question, as well as strategic skills that regulate the other skills (*ibid.*).

In this thesis then, *oral activity* refers to those activities which require spoken production (transactional use of language), but may also require receptive skills in interactive activities. The activities require the participants to employ linguistic (grammar and lexis), functional, and sociolinguistic skills to complete the activities. Also taken into consideration is the amount and type of interaction the activities require, the processes, input, and expected outcome.

2.4 Previous research

It seems that while there is more research on for example the *content* of learning materials, not much research has been conducted on how the development of oral skills is supported by activities in Finnish EFL learning materials. Research on learning materials is often conducted in universities by students gathering data for their MA theses, and research conducted outside universities is scarce in general (Hietala 2013: 38–39, Kangaspunta 2004: 78). The research presented in this subsection will therefore be mostly MA theses. This section provides a brief review of research on learning materials, as well as more

thorough presentation of the results of studies by Hietala (2013) and Salminen (2013), which are more similar to the study conducted for this thesis.

Studies on learning materials have focused on numerous topics. One field of research could be described as studying the attitudes, values, and world view that the materials promote, such as studies regarding gender representation and the concept and representation of culture in textbooks (cf. Kujanpää 2015). Some studies have also focused on pupils' and teachers' views on teaching oral skills (cf. Ahola-Houtsonen (2013), Kaski-Akhawan (2013)). Also, for example Alanen (2000) studied intercultural communication in upper secondary Swedish learning materials.

Other studies have focused more on how the materials support the learning process and learning methods, such as research on the use of authentic materials, and how the material promotes learner autonomy (cf. Gilmore (2007, 2011) for authenticity in materials, Juntura (2008) for learning methods and learner autonomy). Studies concerning textbook activities or tasks have focused on all aspects of language use: reading, writing, listening and speaking activities (cf. Isokallio (2008) for a study on listening comprehension activities and Mantere (2012) on reading activities).

Hietala studied oral activities in the Finnish upper secondary school EFL learning material series *Open Road* and *ProFiles.* The study focused on the types of oral activities found in the materials, their share of the total amount of activities, and the aspects of oral skills which the activities intend to develop (Hietala 2013: 42). First of all, Hietala identified nine different types of activities on the basis of the skills they focused on. These types included for example discussion, pronunciation, translation, and role-play activities (*ibid*: 47).

The oral activities were then divided into three broad categories: tasks, exercises, and drills, of which the latter was further divided into mechanic, meaningful, and communicative drills (Hietala 2013: 48). For the *Open Road* series, Hietala concluded that 21 % of the total amount of activities were oral activities. However, a further content analysis revealed that a fairly large portion (27 %) of the oral activities were in fact activities which practiced vocabulary, not oral skills. Hietala also found that 59 % of the activities were exercises, 30 % were tasks, and the remaining 11 % were drills, of which most were either mechanic or meaningful drills (*ibid*: 79).

Hietala found that the *Profiles* series contained two oral activity types that were not present in the *Open Road* series: activities that practice non-verbal communication and communication strategies (Hietala 2013: 99). In the *ProFiles* series 78 % of the activities were exercises, 19 % were tasks, and 3% were drills. The series contained five drills in total, of which one was communicative and four were mechanic (*ibid*: 104).

Hietala concluded that as the materials included mainly exercises, the activities did not allow for communication and interaction, but instead for mere repetition and practice of skills that students may already have. The results also illustrated the lack of activities which practice communication strategies and cultural aspects of communication. They also revealed that the learning materials contained a very limited amount of activities that support the learning of non-verbal communication skills and that the skills that *are* practiced may be merely miming and gestures (Hietala 2013: 109).

Salminen (2013) studied the communicativeness of oral exercises[16] in the upper secondary school EFL learning material series *ProFiles*. The exercises were analyzed using a modified version of the task analysis sheet designed by Littlejohn (1998). The framework is divided into two sections: publication and design, of which only the latter was used in the study by Salminen. The design section is used to analyze three levels of tasks: what is there, what is required of users, and what is implied (Salminen 2013: 17–18). The first level refers to concrete features of the textbooks themselves, for example the publication date and the number of pages in the books. The study by Salminen was limited to using only levels 2 and 3 of the task analysis sheet.

The second level of the task analysis sheet is used to analyze the participants' role in the tasks, as well as the content of the tasks. That is, what processes the tasks require of the participants, what sort of discourse structure (open or closed) the tasks entail, and whether the tasks are focused or unfocused. Also considered in the second level is whether the tasks are completed alone, or in pairs or groups. The content of the tasks is considered from three aspects; form, source and nature. Form refers to the type of input learners receive and the output the learners are expected to produce. The source may be, for example, the textbook or the teacher, and nature refers to the mental processes elicited by the tasks (Salminen 2013: 18–19).

[16] In the study by Salminen (2013) the terms *exercise* and *task* seem to be used interchangeably. What the terms refer to resemble what in this thesis is called an activity.

The third level is an analysis of the results of levels 1 and 2. The aim is to provide insight into three aspects of tasks: (1) the underlying principles of the materials, how they are selected, and how they are organized and grouped (2) what is the role of learners and teachers, and (3) the role of materials themselves in language learning (Salminen 2013: 18–19).

Salminen studied the oral exercises labeled 'Chat Room' in the *ProFiles* series. The total number of oral exercises in the textbooks was 99. These exercises were further divided into nine different task types, of which discussion was the most common type, and dialogs and role-play exercises the second and third most common (Salminen 2013: 26–27). The most common types of input were written words, phrases and sentences, whereas the expected output is mostly extended (oral) discourse (*ibid*: 55). Salminen considers the topics of the exercises to be relevant and interesting to the intended audience (*ibid.*).

Salminen found that the first two textbooks in the series included mainly exercises demanding narrowly defined discourse, which does not allow for much independent language use. Independent language use, according to Salminen, would also enhance the authenticity of the learning situation. However, Salminen notes that the rest of the series contained also more challenging exercises, and states that all exercises required active participation in order to complete the tasks, as well as communication with other learners. That is, according to Salminen, the exercises did not as such resemble drills, repetition or reading out loud, as they emphasized communication as well as independent and creative language use. Salminen also states that the focus of tasks was mainly on meaning and communication, instead of grammar or syntax (Salminen 2013: 50–51).

Another finding of the study relates to the role of teachers and learners. As noted above, the students themselves are active participants and play an active role in the outcome of the tasks. The role of the teacher is to provide the students with instructions, guidance and support, in contrast to a learning situation in which students passively observe the teacher (Salminen 2013: 51–52). To conclude, Salminen found that the oral exercises conform well to the principles of communicative language teaching, and are therefore suitable materials of which to make use of in such an approach (*ibid*: 56).

Both Hietala (2013) and Salminen (2013) conducted extensive studies on learning materials, which in both studies included the *ProFiles* series. However, the results indicate that they have come to different conclusions. While Hietala concludes that the

activities are merely repetition and provide practice for skills that do not require further developing, Salminen finds that they all promote communication and creative use of language.

This incongruity illustrates the difficulties in finding studies for comparison of results, as studies come to different conclusions depending on the interpretations of the authors. It is also difficult to evaluate the reliability of the studies, as both are MA theses and therefore usually conducted by one person only. This, in turn, denotes that all the decisions made in the analysis were made on a subjective basis (cf. Salminen 2013: 52–53). In order to provide more comparable data for future studies, the research design of this thesis entailed using the same definitions for tasks as Hietala (2013) did.

All in all, the studies offer new perspectives to a field of research that demands more research. However, the review of previous research also shows that studies conducted on learning materials are often merely qualitative, except for providing the number or share of different activities. It is for this reason that the study presented in this thesis is grounded on more quantitative data, from which results are inferred through a qualitative filter. That is, the qualitative supports the quantitative analysis, not vice versa. It is hoped that by relying more on quantitative data, less room is left for individual interpretations, which, in turn, will lead to less conflicting results.

In addition, as previous studies have mostly focused on learning materials from Finnish publishers, the present study also includes materials from a Swedish publishing house. This was done to provide a new perspective to research on learning materials – whether materials differ in different countries, and whether the oral tasks in different materials from different publishers could be used for the further development of the materials.

3. Education in Finland and Sweden

In regard to the empirical study conducted for this thesis, the reader should have an understanding of the national curricula that steer education and the planning of learning materials. In addition, this thesis focuses on evaluating how Finnish learning materials adhere to the renewed Finnish national curriculum. The aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive description of how education is regulated in Finland and Sweden –what role the national curricula play as well as more practical information on when students begin their foreign (in this case English) language studies and what is required of them in regard to oral proficiency.

3.1 Guiding documents

In Finland, The Basic Education Act designates the responsibility for preparing and determining a national core curriculum to the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE)[17] (Basic Education Act 628/1998 4:14 §). The education providers, such as the local education authorities and schools, prepare their own local curriculum which conforms to the norms set by the Finnish National Core Curriculum (Basic Education Act 628/1998 4:15 §). As of the year 1992, the FNAE has not inspected new learning materials, which previously was mandatory (Rinne 1993: 12–13). The most recent curriculum for basic education was published in 2014, and has been implemented in schools since fall 2016. The curriculum is introduced to different grades at different stages. The 7th graders were introduced to the new curriculum in fall 2017, and the 8th and 9th graders in fall 2018 and 2019, respectively (FNBE 2016a: 3).

In Sweden, the Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for the National Agency for Education, *Skolverket*, which draws up the national curricula for compulsory education (Swedish Education Law 2010:800 1:11 §). The most recent curriculum was published in 2011 (*ibid.*). The curriculum was revised in 2016 and 2017 in sections regarding Swedish and Swedish as a second language, as well as digital competence (Skolverket 2016a, Skoverket 2017a).

[17] As of January 2017, the Finnish National Board of Education (FNAE) has changed to the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE). As the curriculum was published in 2016, the reference is to the old name, FNBE 2016.

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) functions as a set of guidelines and objectives for establishing and elaborating syllabi for language teaching, as well as a basis for the assessment of pupils' foreign language skills (Council of Europe 2001: 1). Making use of the framework as a common basis for determining the objectives, content, and methods used in language classroom in Europe improves the transparency of curricula, syllabi, and assessment implemented in European countries. In addition, by making use of common levels of proficiency, pupils' qualifications in their language studies can be understood and recognized on an international level. The CEFR also provides opportunities for enhancing cooperation between education providers and professionals working in the field, as well as for developing and improving curricula and methods (*ibid.*).

The CEFR defines three broad levels of language proficiency: Basic User (A), Independent User (B), and Proficient User (C). All levels are divided into two further levels with the outcome of six levels in total, in which the lowest level of proficiency is A1 and the highest C2 (Council of Europe 2001: 23). The levels are not of equal size, and can be illustrated, for example, as an inverted pyramid in which A level is at the very bottom, and C level at the top, or as a ball that has 6 levels extending outward (see (Council of Europe 2017: 34). For each proficiency level, the CEFR provides a description of the required skills in different areas of language: understanding (listening and reading), speaking (spoken interaction and production), and writing (Council of Europe 2001: 22–27). The CEFR also lists five qualitative aspects to spoken language use: range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence (Council of Europe 2001: 28–29). These aspects can be made use of when designing syllabi and lessons and assessing spoken skills.

Also acknowledged in the Council of Europe language policy is the concept of *language education*. In the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, language education plays an integral role, and is part of what is identified as a paradigm shift in the teaching of languages (Mustaparta, Nissilä & Harmanen 2015: 7–8). One of the guiding principles of language education is, for example, the multidisciplinary role of language i.e. making use of language(s) in all subjects studied at school, as well as making use of different languages alongside one another in language teaching and learning. Language education supports the development of multilingualism, language awareness, as well as the willingness to use languages with confidence in various situations. Other core

principles are the use of authentic materials and learning environments, interaction, and making use of negotiation of meaning – concepts which inherently connect language education to the theories discussed in chapter 2 (Mustaparta et al. 2015: 10–15). To conclude, as both the CEFR and the language policy of the Council of Europe guide education in both Finland and Sweden, the principles they convey should also show in the national curricula, and to go further, in the learning materials as well.

3.2 The national core curricula in Finland and Sweden

This subsection introduces the national curricula in Finland and Sweden, more specifically their take on language and oral (communication) skills. A brief discussion of how they link to the principles of TBLT is provided at the end of this chapter.

In Finland, most pupils begin their English studies in the 3rd grade, but it is also possible for education providers to offer English classes starting from the 1st year of school (Government Decree on the General National Objectives and Distribution of Lesson Hours in Basic Education 422/2012). In regard to foreign language studies, the curriculum includes a table of objectives for different syllabi. As the focus of this thesis is oral skills, the discussion now turns to how oral skills are portrayed in the objectives for syllabus A in English for classes 7–9[18] (FNBE 2016a: 376).

The first objective relating to oral skills is the ability to participate in interaction, in which the emphasis is on conveying meanings. The syllabus also supports pupils in participating in discussions regarding topics suitable for the pupils' age and stage in life. Another objective is to support pupils' skills in negotiation of meaning, and to provide them with the ability and strategies to compensate for lacking language skills, for example by using other languages to support the negotiation of meaning. Also stated in the list of objectives is good pronunciation (FNBE 2016a: 376).

For example, to achieve a grade 8 at the end of the 9th grade, pupils should be able to discuss everyday topics and express their opinions with relative ease, and in general be able to interact in English. The pupils should also be able to paraphrase when they do not recall an intended word or form, confirm that peers understand their message, as well as negotiate meaning when comprehension fails. The pupil should be capable of interacting in a polite manner and be respectful of cultural customs (FNBE 2016a: 376–377).

[18] For a more comprehensive list of objectives regarding also other language skills, see FNBE 2016a: 376).

There is no law or regulation stating that oral skills should be assessed during or at the end of basic education. It is not until general upper secondary school that students have the opportunity to participate in a course focusing specifically on oral skills, as well as have their oral skills assessed (FNBE 2016b: 115–116). Therefore, in basic education pupils rely on feedback given by the teacher to assess their development in spoken English. Oral skills will be assessed on a national level in the matriculation exam in 2022 at the earliest (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017: 53).

The latest publication of the Swedish Curriculum for Compulsory School[19] is from 2017 (Skolverket 2017b).[20] In Sweden, pupils begin their English studies in grades 1–3. The syllabus for English is intended to provide pupils with opportunities to develop the following abilities: Pupils should be able to understand, evaluate and assess the content of spoken and written English in different contexts, as well as be able to both express themselves and make themselves understood through spoken and written communication. To ensure successful communication, pupils are also provided with strategies that help them cope with communication breakdowns. Pupils should also be able to reflect on the living conditions as well as social and cultural phenomena of places and contexts where English is used. Teaching of English should also ensure that pupils have the confidence to use English, and be able to adapt their linguistic output for different purposes, contexts, and interlocutors (Skolverket 2011: 32).

The Swedish curriculum also specifies the core contents for grades 7–9 (Skolverket 2011: 34–35). The contents are divided into three main categories: content of communication, reception (listening and reading), and production and interaction (speaking, writing, and discussion). The first refers to the topic areas pupils should (be able to) discuss, such as familiar subject areas, interests, traditions, and opinions. Receptive skills are developed by listening to and interpreting spoken English from various contexts, registers, and regional variants. Pupils are also to pay attention to for example the pronunciation, intonation patterns, and grammatical structures that speakers use. Pupils also read and listen to, for example, various types of conversations and literature, and learn how texts can be modified to be suitable for different purposes (*ibid.*).

[19] The complete title of the document is *Curriculum for compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre 2011*.

[20] The contents in the 2011 and 2017 versions are the same for English teaching. Only the 2011 version has been translated into English, and therefore, in order to provide the reader with references in English, the following references to the Swedish core curriculum are to the publication from 2011.

The last content is production and interaction. Pupils learn different language strategies that compensate for gaps in language skills and help cope with communication breakdowns. They also learn argumentation and discussion skills, and how to vary, clarify, and modify their oral production to meet the needs of the context and interlocutors or recipients. The pupils also acquire knowledge about for example pronunciation, fixed language expressions, and grammatical structures, which they can utilize to improve their communicational skills (Skolverket 2011: 35).

For example, the oral skills required for grade A[21] in English at the end of year 9 are as follows: In oral production, the pupil can express himself/herself with ease in a concise and coherent manner, and is, to some extent, able to modify and adapt production on the basis of purpose, context, and interlocutor or recipient. The pupil also knows how to monitor and improve his/her oral skills autonomously. Interaction is conducted with similar ease and conciseness as production, but the ability to modify one's production is not necessarily as advanced as with simple production. Lastly, the pupil has acquired communicational strategies and knows how to apply them when linguistic skills fall short, and is able to improve his/her interaction skills (Skolverket 2011: 41–42).

In Sweden, English is tested on a national level in years 6 and 9. Oral skills are assessed in both exams, alongside reading and listening comprehension, and written production. In 6th grade, pupils take the oral test in pairs, and the test in effect is a discussion lasting 10–15 minutes. The assessment is done on the basis of the objectives set for the course. In 9th grade, the pupils perform a similar discussion task in either pairs or groups of three. In addition to using the same assessment method as with 6th graders, the 9th graders' discussions are also taped and assessed by a group of experienced teachers to provide validation for the assessment (Skolverket 2017c, Skolverket 2017d).

To conclude, the importance of oral skills in foreign languages is recognized in both Finland and Sweden. Both curricula stress the importance of teaching pupils the skills to produce spoken language and interact in English, as well as to provide them with a wide array of communicational strategies to ease and bring cohesion to interaction. It should be noted that in both curricula, languages are learned in order to be able to *communicate, interact,* and *negotiate meaning*, even if one's language skills are limited. They also

[21] It should be noted that the Swedish grade A is more advanced than the Finnish grade 8, which is closer to the Swedish grade B. The requirements for grade B are satisfied when most of the knowledge requirements for grade A are met.

emphasize the objective to build pupils' courage to use languages with confidence, as well as to provide pupils with opportunities to practice different styles and registers for different contexts.

As the curricula do not provide concrete examples or guidelines as to *how* teaching should be conducted in order to support the development of such skills, nor do they refer to any specific linguistic or pedagogic method, it is difficult to determine whether the teaching in either of the two countries conforms to prominent theories of second language acquisition, such as task-based language learning. In order to provide more information on how students acquire oral skills, the study introduced in the following chapter will examine three series of learning materials used in the 7th grade English classes in Finland and Sweden, and will attempt to determine how the development of oral skills is supported by the oral tasks in the chosen materials.

4. Research design

This chapter is divided into two sections. The materials are introduced in the first section and the methods and stages of analysis in the second.

4.1 Materials

The learning materials chosen for this study are two Finnish series for seventh grade learners of English in the A1 syllabus, as well as one Swedish series used in the seventh grade.[22] The learning materials included in the study include the textbooks and workbooks. The teacher's materials were excluded from the study due to the differences between the Finnish and Swedish series. The study would also have become too extensive for an MA thesis.

The Finnish series, *On the Go* and *Scene*, are publications of two major publication houses in Finland, Sanoma Pro and Otava, respectively. These series were chosen because they follow the renewed Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 (SanomaPro 2015, Otava 2016), and should therefore be in accordance with the objectives presented in the curriculum.

Specifically lower secondary school learning materials were chosen because previous studies (see section 2.4) have primarily focused on upper secondary school books, leaving a gap in the literature on learning materials for younger learners. Two Finnish series were chosen to ensure that the amount of data is sufficient for the analysis. In addition, while SanomaPro and Otava both offer also other series for 7th graders, *On the Go* and *Scene* were chosen as they are the only series that adhere to the principles of the new curriculum. Seventh grade books were chosen because the learning material for grades 8–9 had not yet been renewed when the analysis was begun.

The Swedish series chosen for this study is the *Focus on English* series by Liber. The series was chosen on account of the structural similarities between this series and the Finnish ones. The series was also estimated to match the difficulty level of the Finnish ones, and its objectives reflected concepts, such as activeness in one's own learning (or learning by doing), that arise also in the Finnish National Core Curriculum (FNBE 2016a,

[22] The Swedish curriculum divides language syllabi into 'English' and 'modern languages', the latter beginning at the earliest in grade 4 (Skolverket 2011: 32–33, 73–74).

Liber 2017). The Swedish series was chosen because its purpose in this study is to provide a new perspective to research on Finnish learning materials. That is, the study does not aim at comparing Finnish and Swedish learning materials, nor at determining whether two Finnish series are 'better' than two Swedish series, but instead to describe Finnish learning materials also in light of materials from another country than Finland. Therefore, including only one Swedish series (as opposed to two) was deemed sufficient for this research design.

The material is introduced more thoroughly in appendix 1. The description provides the reader with an understanding of the content as well as of the similarities between the materials. The activity types introduced in the description refer to categories presented in the books. These are separate from the task categories introduced in the results of this study. The macrostructure of the books will not be further analyzed in this thesis.

4.2 Methods

The primary method used in this study is content analysis. Content analysis is a prominent method in qualitative research and is therefore a justified choice of method. It is a method which begins with the selection of data from, for example, a more extensive data bank. The procedure continues with the labeling, categorizing, or marking of specific aspects or themes in the data. These observations are then gathered and analyzed, and conclusions are drawn (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002: 93–95). Content analysis may include also quantitative data, but it is not a necessary component of the method (*ibid.*). This analysis is also theory-driven: The analysis begins with the selection and categorization of specific data, after which a predetermined theory, in this case task-based language learning, is made use of in the following stages of the analysis (*ibid:* 98–101).

This study includes both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The purpose of the quantitative analysis is to, first of all, provide a holistic view of the materials, that is, the number of oral activities and tasks in the material. Quantitative methods are also used to study the variance in the materials as well as to function as an indicator of where the differences and similarities between the materials lie. The qualitative information provides support for the quantitative analysis, as well as helps in presenting concrete examples of data which would have been quite abstract without the support of qualitative categorizing.

The research questions of this study are as follows:

1. What is the share of oral activities and oral tasks in the lower secondary school 7th grade learning materials *On the Go 1*, *Scene 1*, and *Focus on English 7*?
2. How can the tasks be described in light of task-based language learning and teaching?
3. What similarities and differences can be found between the oral tasks in Finnish and Swedish learning materials?
4. In relation to the renewed Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, how similar to an ideal task are the tasks in the material?

These questions were specified to a further four questions, which are introduced in subsection 4.2.2. Before turning to the description of the stages of analysis, the modified framework of Ellis (2003) referred to in subsections 2.3.4 and 2.3.5 is introduced below.

4.2.1 The framework used for task description

The framework by Ellis (2003) consists of four design features, each of which has its own key dimensions. The first design feature, *input*, refers to the medium (such as written or oral) and the organization of the input. The organization can be of either a loose or tight structure, which affects the product of the task. Tasks of a loose structure demand a more creative response from the learners, whereas the completion of a tight structured task may merely require recalling a pre-structured form from memory (Ellis 2003: 123, 217).

The second design feature, *conditions*, refers to the manner in which information is presented and how it is to be used. This feature includes four key dimensions: information configuration, interactant relationship, interaction requirement, and orientation. Information configuration determines whether the information is split, which denotes a situation in which one participant has the information, or shared, by which all participants have access to the same data (Ellis 2003: 86–90, 217).

The interactant relationship in a task can be one-way or two-way. In a one-way task, one participant holds all the information and is to transfer this information to the other participant(s). A two-way task requires the exchanging of information of all participants and demands much more negotiation of meaning (Ellis 2003: 86–90, 217). The third key dimension, interaction requirement, refers to whether the exchange of information is obligatory or optional in order to complete the task. The last dimension, orientation, refers

to whether the participants should keep to differing views on the subject matter at hand (divergent orientation) or strive to reach a consensus (convergent orientation) (*ibid*.).

The third design feature is *processes*, which includes two key dimensions: the type of cognitive operations that the task engages in, and the discourse mode required by the task. Ellis (2003: 217) lists three types of cognitive operations: the exchanging of information, exchanging of opinions, and explaining reasoning. These operations are analogous to Prabhu's (1987) task classification. The discourse mode can be monologic or dialogic (Ellis 2003: 217). To provide an example, a speech is monologic whereas a discussion is dialogic.

The fourth design feature is *outcomes* – the result or end product of the task. There are three key dimensions used to describe the outcome: the medium, the discourse domain or genre, and the scope. The medium can be pictorial, oral, or written. Here genre not only implicates a certain structure and style, but additionally a specific communicative purpose. For example, job application letters and recipes are varieties of genre. The scope can be open or closed, which, as discussed above, refers to whether the task has multiple possible outcomes, or merely one or a limited amount (*ibid.*).

Design feature	**Key dimensions**			
Input	Medium	Organization		
	pictorial oral written	tight loose		
Conditions	Information configuration	Interactant relationship	Interaction requirement	Orientation
	split shared	one-way two-way	required optional	convergent divergent
Processes	Cognitive	Discourse mode		
	exchanging information exchanging opinions explaining reasoning	monologic dialogic		
Outcomes	Medium	Task category	Scope	Discourse scope
	pictorial oral written		closed open	short extended

Table 1. A modified version of the general framework for classifying tasks by Ellis (2003: 217).

In this thesis, genre was adjusted for the purposes of the study, and was replaced with *task category* to indicate the sort of activity the pupils engage in, for example a discussion or a presentation. This was done due to the inconsistency of the 'genre levels' in the material. While other tasks could be described as a specific genre, such as an interview, others could merely be described to engage pupils in producing descriptive discourse. In addition, a fourth key dimension was added to outcomes: discourse scope, which divides

into short and extended discourse. This dimension refers to whether the participants are required to produce merely short replies, or more extended ones. Table 1 on the previous page illustrates the general framework used to describe tasks in the empirical part of this thesis.

4.2.2 Description of the stages of analysis

The first stage of the analysis included identifying all the oral activities in the material (see subsection 2.3.6). The learning materials naturally differ in the way activities divide into separate activities, that is, whether they are simply numbered (1, 2, 3,…), or whether they include smaller parts, such as a, b, and c. Each smaller part of an activity was counted as a separate activity.[23] The next step was to determine which activities were tasks. In order to identify tasks, the activities were scrutinized in view of the four core principles and six key features of tasks (see section 2.3).

In the third stage of analysis, the oral tasks were categorized according to a modified version of the general framework by Ellis (2003), introduced in the previous subsection. This part of the analysis was conducted to provide a descriptive view of the types of oral tasks (and their different feature combinations) that current learning materials include. Each task was then inserted into an excel file in its analyzed form. That is, each task feature was given a truth value of either 0 or 1, marking the feature as either absent or present, respectively.

The tasks were placed in adjacent columns, forming and 18 x 243 matrix to be used in the quantitative and qualitative analysis (cf. table 2 on the following page). In order to improve the reliability of the findings, all activities were then analyzed again in terms of the four principles and six key features of tasks to ascertain that each activity marked a task was, in fact, a task. In addition, the features of each task were analyzed a second time[24]. To elaborate, repeating the analysis ensured that the analysis conducted on the activities analyzed first was done in an identical matter to that of activities analyzed last. For reference, the tasks analyzed in table 2 on the following page are illustrated in appendix 2.

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[23] For example, if the activities had been counted according to their 'activity number', the number of activities in *Scene* would have been much smaller, as the series consists of numerous activities that divide into smaller parts. However, each part (a, b, c,) was seen to be distinctly different from the other parts. Therefore, the parts were analyzed as separate activities.

[24] In order to first introduce all stages of analysis jointly, a more specific example of how an activity was identified as a task is not introduced until subsection 4.2.1.

Design feature	Key dimension		OG.w.102	OG.w.104	OG.w.127
Input	Medium	pictorial	0	1	0
		oral	1	1	1
		written	1	0	1
	Organization	tight	1	0	1
		loose	0	1	0
Conditions	Information configuration	split	1	1	1
		shared	0	0	0
	Interactant relationship	one-way	1	0	1
		two-way	0	1	0
	Interaction requirement	required	1	1	1
		optional	0	0	0
	orientation	convergent	1	1	1
		divergent	0	0	0
Processes	Cognitive	exchanging information	1	1	1
		exchanging opinions	1	0	1
		explaining reasoning	0	0	0
	Discourse mode	monologic	0	1	0
		dialogic	1	0	1
Outcomes	Medium	pictorial	0	0	0
		oral	1	1	1
		written	1	0	0
	Scope	closed	1	1	1
		open	0	0	0
	Discourse scope	short	1	1	0
		extended	0	0	1
Task category			Interview	Descriptive discourse	Interview

Table 2. An example of how the tasks were marked in the excel file. The example includes three tasks from the workbook of On the Go.

Each task was given its own 'code name' so that they could be easily retrieved from the material. The first 2–3 letters indicate the series and whether task is from the workbook ('w') or textbook ('t'). *On the Go* had continuous numbering, so each task could be given the same number as it had in the books. In *Scene,* the numbering restarted in each section, and therefore also the unit and section[25] had to be inserted into the code name. In *Focus*

[25] For example, 'In action' was marked ia. See appendix 1 for a more extended review of the contents of the material.

on English, the workbook tasks were marked with a reference to the section they appear in. The textbook tasks were marked with a reference to the page number.

In the previous stages of analysis, several decisions were made in relation to the presence or absence of certain features. While most features were rather clear to determine as present or absent, discussed here are the features that required a set of principles. It was decided that if a task did not explicitly instruct pupils to disagree or present counterarguments, the task had a convergent orientation. This was done because the tasks mainly engaged the pupils in presenting information about themselves or their opinions, and not to argue for them. Therefore, most of the tasks were marked solely as convergent.

In addition, interaction was considered to be optional especially in presentations, but also in tasks in which pupils merely present information to their partner, to which their partner was not required to react. It is important to note that such tasks could still be dialogic, as they might have involved two speakers. However, very few tasks in the material had a combination of dialogue and optional interaction. Also, some tasks instructed to use Finnish if using (only) English interrupted conveying the message. These tasks were also identified as oral tasks, as even if the pupils were to use mostly Finnish to complete task, they would still be engaging in meaningful and goal-oriented language use in an English-speaking context. As noted in subsection 2.3.5, the Finnish core curriculum encourages to use other languages to support interaction when skills in a specific language (here English) are lacking.

In addition, the task type, which in the original framework was marked as genre, was in this study used to give an idea of the type of activity in question. The categories were determined on the basis of those found in the studies by Hietala (2013) and Salminen (2013).

After all the tasks had been marked into the excel file, they were analyzed in view of four more specified, descriptive questions that would provide the basis for the research questions and discussion of findings. Each analysis was conducted on all workbooks, textbooks, and series.

The specified questions are as follows:

1. What is the ratio of oral tasks to oral activities, and what are the main categories of tasks?
2. Which features vary the most? Are there differences in the percentage shares of different features?
3. What are the most common feature combinations of tasks?
4. How close to an ideal task are the tasks in the material?

The first questions entailed a simple summation of all tasks and activities. The second question was added to include a more targeted analysis of variance in each book and series, and divides into two ways of finding variance. Variance was studied in order to build a basis for the comparison of the Finnish and Swedish learning materials, as well as for a more detailed analysis of the tasks in the material.

To begin with, variance was counted for each individual feature (or row in the excel sheet) using the 'var.p' function in excel, which is used to calculate the population variance of a set of data. The greater the value, the more there is variance in the specific feature, and the number of tasks the feature is present in is close to 50 % of the overall amount. Therefore, if the variance is small, the same feature is present in either most of the tasks, or in very few. For this data, the mean is 0,25. In the analysis, those features that had a variance of more than 0,23 but less or equal to 0,25 (a feature appears in 50 ± 15 % of the tasks) were considered to have a large enough variance to be taken into account in further analysis.

To exemplify what the variance results then show is, on one hand, whether there is an even number of tasks in which, for example, interaction is required or optional. If the results show that there is by far a larger number of tasks in which interaction is optional, it would indicate that teachers should modify the tasks to ensure that pupils practice oral *interaction* as well. On the other hand, were the results to show that variation is scarce in a given feature, for example in discourse scope (short or extended), and that most tasks require only short replies, it would be up to the teacher to ensure that pupils engage also in tasks in which they produce extended discourse. The results also provide publishers with more detailed information about their learning materials.

The other way of studying variance was to count the portions or percentage shares of the number of times a specific feature is present in the material, which was also exemplified in the previous paragraph. For example, approximately 34 % (42 tasks out of a total of 123 tasks) of the tasks in workbooks included pictorial input. These not only indicate

variance, but also work as an indicator of the similarities and differences between different learning materials. However, it is important to remember in comparing the percentage shares of each individual feature that these numbers do not as such describe the content of the materials, or the task type (as a feature combination). The features do not exist in a vacuum, but as parts of a combination of features. For this reason, the study also includes an analysis of the feature combinations present in the material (question 3).

In order to find the different feature combinations in the material, an excel macro was coded to automatize the process, as well as to rule out human error in calculations. The macro code can be found in appendix 3. As mentioned above, the macro was used to find all the different feature combinations in a given set of data, as well as to provide the number of times the specific combination appears in the given data, which in this study meant all workbooks, textbooks, and series.

What the previous analysis of variance and feature combinations then provides is an account of the variance of different features. That is, the amount of practice pupils gain in different features (of tasks, and the language system in general), of which most are binary: for example, in input organization, tight and loose are binary features. To elaborate, this shows whether pupils are not exposed to a certain feature at all, and which features are always present in a task. That is, the analysis shows what sort of tasks pupils practice extensively, and what hardly at all. To conclude, what this analysis adds to the research on learning materials is a perspective on what features tasks mostly consist of and what could be added when using these materials in classrooms, and when renewing the materials. It also draws attention to possible points of further development in terms of, for example, task features.

Question 4 is the most descriptive and experimental piece of analysis in this study. The concept of an ideal task was introduced in chapter 2.3.5. The aim of question 4 is to describe how close to such a task the tasks in the data are. In order to do this, the features of an ideal task were inserted into one column in the excel file. An identical feature combination was replicated into the subsequent columns in such a way that the number of columns with an ideal task matched that of all the tasks in the material.

In order to find the number of differences that existed between a given task and the ideal task, a new matrix of similar dimensions (25 features x number of tasks) was constructed using the ‘abs’ (absolute value) function in excel. The absolute value was taken for the

difference of a cell in the original task and the matching cell (or feature) in the ideal task. As a result, each column in the new matrix contained zeros in the features that match those of an ideal task, and ones in those features that do not match. The end result is that the sum of all the features in the new column shows the number of differences, and by repeating this procedure for every task (each row and column), one can find which tasks are closest to an ideal task.

It should be noted that the analysis of ideal tasks could also have been conducted in a reversed order, so that the most common feature combinations be compared to features of an ideal task. That is, that the analysis would not be based on a predetermined ideal task, but instead to compare the tasks actually present in the material to an ideal one. The order of analysis chosen for this thesis was chosen because it was less strenuous to conduct with excel.

To conclude, the final stage of analysis consisted of reviewing the results of the analysis and reflecting on the findings.

4.2.3 Identifying tasks

This subsection offers an example of how possible oral activities were identified as tasks before they were analyzed according to the task classification framework presented in subsection 4.2.1.

One activity that was identified as a task was T608 ‘Work with a partner’ in unit six of the *On the Go* textbook (On the Go textbook: 101). The theme of this unit is clothing, and before activity T608, there are two different activities that introduce pupils to phrases used in customer service.

Figure 3. Example of an activity identified as a task (On the Go textbook: 101)

The four key principles of tasks and six criterial features of a task were introduced in subsection 2.3. The former are discussed first. In activity T608, the participants engage in a meaningful activity in which they have a 'gap' to fill. In this case, the gap is what the customer needs, and whether the store has those items. In addition to linguistic skills (for example phrases and vocabulary needed in the situation), the participants also need social skills to deal with the situation. Lastly, the goal of the situation is to buy specific items in the store – that is, the purpose is not to practice specific forms or phrases, or simple language use.

As to the six criterial features, activity T608 satisfies all six. The activity is a workplan, as the instruction provide a loosely predetermined outline for completing the activity, and the primary focus is on meaning. The task makes use of oral and listening skills, and requires the participants to exchange information to complete the activity. The activity clearly has a communicative outcome. To conclude, the activity can be identified as a task.

4.3 Reliability and validity of the study

This chapter concludes with a brief discussion on the reliability and validity of the study at hand.

To provide the reader with a replicable research design, the reliability, the material, and each stage of analysis were described in detail. However, it must be noted that the fact that each activity was analyzed by only one person decreases the study's reliability, starting from the stage of identifying oral activities. Activities were identified as oral only if they explicitly entailed oral output. In order to improve reliability in identifying oral tasks, two sets of principles (or criteria) were used. All activities that met the criteria were identified as tasks, and no room was left for interpretation. As a result, even before the activities were analyzed according to their specific features (during which they were under even more extensive scrutiny), the tasks had already undergone two filters. In addition, as mentioned in subsection 4.2.2, the process of identifying tasks and analyzing their features was conducted twice to improve the reliability of the study.

The validity of the study was ensured by choosing a framework and classification of tasks which is a combination of different approaches to task analysis (see subsections 2.3 and 4.2.1). Therefore, the theoretical framework behind the study is one that takes an extensive, multidisciplinary perspective on tasks.

The study is a descriptive analysis of what the learning materials offer – a 'what is there' sort of analysis. Therefore, it is difficult to say how teachers and pupils use these activities or interpret the instructions. For example, in reference to the illustrations that appeared next to several activities in the *On the Go* workbook (see appendix 1), some activities that were marked as 'not oral' but contained an illustration marking dialogue might be used as a read aloud oral activity. Teachers may also encourage the pupils to complete the tasks in a different way than according to the instructions, for example ask them to discuss their opinions further.

In addition, many decisions on for example task features had to be made during the analysis stage. For example, the fact that a convergent orientation was determined as the default choice for tasks does have a significant effect on the results. Considering that qualitative research always entails some sort of categorization or labeling of data, exposing the data to subjective decisions is difficult to prevent. All stages of analysis and decisions were explained explicitly to improve the transparency of the research design.

In reference to the ideal task, it is important to note that as different pupils make use of different learning styles and strategies, it is difficult to determine a single task that is ideal for everyone. Instead, this study takes more a descriptive, experimental and holistic approach to tasks and provides an example of how studies on more detailed feature combinations work in practice.

5. Results and discussion

The results of the analysis are introduced in this chapter. As mentioned in subsection 4.2, the research questions presented in earlier sections were further specified to the four questions below:

1. What is the ratio of oral tasks to oral activities, and what are the main categories of tasks?
2. Which features vary the most? Are there differences in the percentage shares of different features?
3. What are the most common feature combinations of tasks?
4. How close to an ideal task are the tasks in the material?

The questions were ordered in such a way that the first question provides the reader with an overview of the data: the number of oral activities and tasks, as well as the different categories the tasks divide into. Question 2 presents a microlevel analysis of the individual features of tasks, whereas question 3 provides the reader with a more holistic analysis of the tasks. The results to both questions 2 and 3 can be considered from the view of applying such tasks in a classroom context. Question 4 is a more descriptive analysis, and shows what the materials *could* include, as well as by which modifications teachers could make the oral tasks more ideal and in line with the current core curriculum. After presenting the main findings, they are further discussed in subsection 5.2.

5.1 Results

Question 1. What is the ratio of oral tasks to oral activities, and what are the main categories of tasks?

All in all, the material consisted of 562 oral activities, out of which 240 were identified as oral tasks. The percentage shares are presented in table 3 on the following page. *Scene* contains by far the largest number of oral tasks and activities. *On the Go* contains more oral activities than *Focus on English,* but has a lower percentage of tasks. Out of all the materials, *Focus on English* has the highest percentage of oral tasks: 52,2 % of all oral activities are tasks.

On the Go has the lowest percentage of tasks: only a third of the oral activities are tasks. In addition, *On the Go* in general contains the lowest number of tasks, even though it contains 12 more oral activities than *Focus on English.* As noted, *Scene* contains the largest number of oral activities, which is nearly four times that of *On the Go* and *Focus*

on English. However, the workbooks of *On the Go* and *Scene* have approximately the same percentage of tasks. Likewise, the share of tasks in the textbooks of *Scene* and *Focus on English* differ by only two percentage points.

Series	Oral tasks	Oral activities	Percentage of tasks out of all oral activities
On the Go textbook	18	43	41,9 %
On the Go workbook	16	59	27,1 %
Total	**34**	**102**	**33,3 %**
Scene textbook	82	204	40,2 %
Scene workbook	77	166	46,4 %
Total	**159**	**370**	**43,0 %**
Focus on English textbook	17	28	60,7 %
Focus on English workbook	30	62	48,4 %
Total	**47**	**90**	**52,2 %**
Total, all	**240**	**562**	**42,7 %**

Table 3. The oral tasks, activities, and percentage shares of tasks/activities in each textbook, workbook and series.

The main task categories found in the material were interviews, descriptive discourse, presentations and short presentations, discussions, exchanging information about a text or picture, and role-play – a total of seven task categories. Role-play refers to acting out different situations such as customer service or conversations between a child and parent. Short presentations were separated from (long) presentations to ensure that the reader does not infer that oral tasks were mostly longer presentations, as the total number of all presentations is 50, rendering presentations as the second most common task category.

In addition to traditional interviews, tasks that required exchanging information or opinions were categorized as interviews. Descriptive discourse entailed the pupils being asked to describe for example an object, person, or animal to their partner.

These results are presented in table 4 on the following page. The categories are organized in descending order by frequency, so that the most common task category, interview, is in the top-most row. The least common category was presentation. The number of different task categories present in each book is presented in the bottom-most row.

The results show that *Scene* includes all categories (7). *Focus on English* contains the least number of different task categories (5). The number of different task categories in *On the Go* and *Focus on English* textbooks is not even half of that of *Scene*.

Categories	OG (w)	OG (t)	S (w)	S (t)	FoE (w)	FoE (t)	Workbooks	Textbooks	All
Interview	6	9	15	32	3	-	24	41	**65**
Descriptive discourse	4	-	16	20	5	-	25	20	**45**
Short presentation	-	-	17	1	9	9	26	10	**36**
Discussion	1	-	4	9	11	8	16	17	**33**
Questions about text or picture	-	7	10	10	-	-	10	17	**27**
Role-play	-	2	7	9	2	-	9	11	**20**
Presentation	5	-	8	1	-	-	13	1	**14**
Different categories	**4**	**3**	**7**	**7**	**5**	**2**	**7**	**7**	**7**

Table 4. The different categories. Abbreviations are as follows: OG: On the Go, S: Scene, FoE: Focus on English, w: workbook, and t: textbook.

The results also show that in the workbooks the most common categories were short presentations, descriptive discourse, and interviews. In the textbooks, the most common categories are interviews, descriptive discourse, discussion tasks and questions about a text or picture. Role-play and (longer) presentations were the least common categories. The workbooks of *On the Go* and *Focus on English* include a greater number of different categories than the textbooks. For *Scene*, the amounts are identical. The number of times a specific category appears is an indication of the type of task pupils gain practice in, and conversely, in which types of tasks they gain less practice. For example, the materials contain almost twice as many interviews as they do discussion tasks.

Question 2. Which features vary the most? Are there differences in the percentage shares of different features?

The results of question 2 provide insight into which task features are present in the material. It should be noted that task features can be generalized to for example discourse features (e.g. learning to present arguments and counterarguments), and are in that way easily applied and understood not just as a task feature, but as a *learning objective*. For example, as the results on the following page show that a convergent orientation has minimal variance, and that most tasks are convergent, teachers may have to encourage

pupils to present counterarguments when completing tasks to ensure that they also gain practice in argumentative discourse.

All material included, the most variance is found in the features “exchanging opinions” and “discourse scope“. There is also variance in whether the task is tight or loose, and whether the task requires explaining reasoning. The features that vary least are oral output (all are oral tasks), convergent orientation, and exchanging information. Almost all tasks include all of the three aforementioned features.

There is most variance in *Focus on English*. In *On the Go* and *Scene*, the number of features with the greatest variance is equal and the greatest variance is in the same features: exchanging opinions and discourse scope. In *On the Go* and *Scene*, the workbook is more varied than the textbook.[26] In *Focus on English*, the order is vice versa, and variance in greater in the textbook.[27]

In *On the Go*, there is least variance in information configuration and orientation. The information is always split and the orientation convergent. On the other hand, there are two features that have a variance of more than 0,23: exchanging opinions, and discourse scope. In *Scene*, all tasks engage the pupil in exchanging information. Most variance occurs in the following features: input, interaction requirement, exchanging opinions, and discourse scope.

In *Focus on English*, all tasks include exchanging information. In the workbook, there is most variance in the input, interactant relationship, interaction requirement, and explaining reasoning. In the textbook, all tasks have a convergent orientation and require extended discourse.

As to the percentage shares of each feature, it is interesting to compare the materials to one another. For example, if the teacher were to want to use material that includes more practice in tasks with an open outcome (and therefore, promotes more creative language use), the results show which material offers the most optimal tasks – that is, for example discussion tasks and tasks that require the pupil to describe objects, people, or phenomena. The percentage shares are also an indication of the sort of tasks that are present in the material, but it is important to remember that tasks are a combination of

[26] As to the workbooks, in *On the Go*, 6 features have a variance of more than 0,23, in *Scene* 5 features. In the textbooks, both series 3 features with a variance of over 0,23

[27] Variance is over 0,23 in 3 features in the workbook, and in 4 features in the textbook.

features, and therefore the figures presented below cannot be taken as representatives of task types. Therefore, the results offer an indication of what is there, and what is not. In table 5 below, the highlighted figures mark the similarities in each row. The whole row is highlighted, if the difference between the lowest percentage and the highest percentage is less than 10 percentage points.

Design feature		**On the Go**		**Scene**		**Focus on English**	
Input	pictorial	10	**29,4 %**	46	**28,9 %**	8	17,0 %
	oral	32	**94,1 %**	135	**84,9 %**	35	74,5 %
	written	29	**85,3 %**	109	68,6 %	42	**89,4 %**
	tight	23	**67,6 %**	113	**71,1 %**	23	48,9 %
	loose	11	**32,4 %**	46	**28,9 %**	24	51,1 %
Conditions	split	27	**79,4 %**	113	**71,1 %**	38	**80,9 %**
	shared	7	**20,6 %**	46	**28,9 %**	9	**19,1 %**
	one-way	27	**79,4 %**	125	**78,6 %**	24	51,1 %
	two-way	7	**20,6 %**	34	**21,4 %**	23	48,9 %
	required	29	85,3 %	115	**72,3 %**	30	**63,8 %**
	optional	5	14,7 %	44	**27,7 %**	17	**36,2 %**
	convergent	34	**100,0 %**	157	**98,7 %**	46	**97,9 %**
	divergent	2	**5,9 %**	10	**6,3 %**	5	**10,6 %**
Processes	exchanging information	32	**94,1 %**	159	**100,0 %**	47	**100,0 %**
	exchanging opinions	16	**47,1 %**	73	**45,9 %**	26	**55,3 %**
	explaining reasoning	11	**32,4 %**	55	**34,6 %**	19	**40,4 %**
	monologic	7	**20,6 %**	31	**19,5 %**	16	34,0 %
	dialogic	27	**79,4 %**	128	**80,5 %**	31	66,0 %
Outcomes	pictorial	6	**17,6 %**	18	**11,3 %**	2	4,3 %
	oral	34	**100,0 %**	158	**99,4 %**	47	**100,0 %**
	written	6	**17,6 %**	26	**16,4 %**	9	**19,1 %**
	closed	25	**73,5 %**	130	**81,8 %**	40	**85,1 %**
	open	9	**26,5 %**	29	**18,2 %**	7	**14,9 %**
	short	13	**38,2 %**	76	**47,8 %**	3	6,4 %
	extended	21	**61,8 %**	83	**52,2 %**	44	93,6 %

Table 5. The percentage shares of each feature in each series. Grey highlight marks the features (or rows) that have a difference of less than 10 percentage points.

The fact that the grey portions in the table keep to the left illustrate how *On the Go* and *Scene* are similar to one another, whereas *Focus on English* differs from both. Differences of over 20 % between the Finnish and Swedish materials are in the following features:

input organization (tight/loose), interactant relationship (one-way/two-way), and discourse scope (short/extended). The results indicate that in *Focus on English*, there are more tasks with a loose structure and extended discourse – over 90 % of tasks include extended discourse. In addition, in *Focus on English* a larger share of tasks engages in two-way interaction that is more likely to develop skills in negotiation of meaning.

It should also be noted that *Focus on English* includes a larger share of cognitive processes other than exchanging information. For example, whereas in the Finnish materials less than half of the tasks engage in exchanging opinions, in *Focus on English* the share is 55 %. Over 40 % also include explaining reasoning.

The features in which all materials are *most alike* are the conditions (split/shared), orientation, cognitive processes, output, and discourse scope. The features by which the Finnish series differ from one another is written input and interaction requirement: Whereas in *On the Go* 85 % of tasks require interaction between the pupils, in *Scene* the share is 72 %.

Question 3. What are the most common feature combinations of tasks?

The 240 tasks realized as 134 different feature combinations. Table 6 on the following page presents the three most common combinations in the whole material. The first row of the last three columns indicates a task that represents an example of the feature combination.[28] The ones and zeros present which features are present in the task. The task category provides an example of the type of category such a feature combination represents. The numbers in the bottom-most row indicate the number of times the specific feature combination appears in the selected material, which in turn is also an indicator of the amount of variance in the material.[29]

To exemplify, the most common feature combination (the fourth column in table 6 on the following page, activity *OG.w.405*) appears 20 times. The task in question could be an interview, which often entails exchanging information or opinions on a given subject. Pupils are given predetermined questions or useful phrases that they can use, and the task involves dialogue. Therefore, they receive written input and interaction is required. They also receive oral input from their partner during the task.

[28] The coding of the tasks was explained in subsection 4.2.2.
[29] The smaller the number, the less times it appears in the material, leaving space for other combinations.

In addition, the three most frequently appearing tasks are of a tight structure and primarily involve exchanging information. The most common feature combination (*OG.w.405)* also involves exchanging opinions and explaining reasoning, whereas the second and third most common (*OG.t.106a* and *s.w.2gt.6b*) do not.

Design feature	**Key dimension**		**OG.w.405**	**OG.t.106a**	**s.w.2gt.6b**
Input	Medium	pictorial	0	0	0
		oral	1	1	1
		written	1	1	1
	Organization	tight	1	1	1
		loose	0	0	0
Conditions	Information configuration	split	1	0	1
		shared	0	1	0
	Interactant relationship	one-way	1	1	1
		two-way	0	0	0
	Interaction requirement	required	1	1	1
		optional	0	0	0
	Orientation	convergent	1	1	1
		divergent	0	0	0
Processes	Cognitive	exchanging information	1	1	1
		exchanging opinions	1	0	0
		explaining reasoning	1	0	0
	Discourse mode	monologic	0	0	0
		dialogic	1	1	1
Outcomes	Medium	pictorial	0	0	0
		oral	1	1	1
		written	0	0	0
	Scope	closed	1	1	1
		open	0	0	0
	Discourse scope	short	0	1	1
		extended	1	0	0
Task category			Interview	Questions about text	Interview
The number of times the combination appears			20	17	11

Table 6. The three most common feature combinations of the whole material.

The most frequently appearing task takes the form of an interview that engages participants in extended discourse. Hence, the knowledge is split and interaction is one-way, because the tasks do not require negotiation of meaning or any further clarification

or elaboration of what is conveyed. As the questions are predetermined, the outcome is closed. The output that the tasks require is more extensive than mere yes/no answers or predetermined phrases. In addition, the output is extended and always only oral.

The second and third most common feature combinations (tasks *OG.t.106a* and *s.w.2gt.6b* in table 6 on the previous page) differ from the first mostly by cognitive processes. The second and third involve only exchanging information. In addition, the information configuration is shared in the second most common feature combination, as the task entails answering questions about a text in the textbook, which is available to both participants. Also, the discourse scope is short in both. All three tasks engage the pupils in dialogue. It should be noted that while the second most common feature combination provides pupils with shared knowledge of the information content of the task, in none of the three combinations do pupils as such build on that knowledge. The tasks engage pupils only in one-way exchanging of information, by which they practice presenting their knowledge orally, but do not build on their opinions or arguments.

In *On the Go* and *Scene*, the most common and second most common feature combinations are identical to the ones presented above (*OG.w.405* and *OG.t.106a*). For *Scene*, also the third most common feature combination is the same (*s.w.2gt.6b*). As to the *On the Go* series, the third most common feature combination differs from that of *Scene* by two features. In *On the Go*, the discourse scope is short, and cognitive processes involve also exchanging opinions.

Most common combinations	**On the Go**	**Scene**
1. (OG.w.405)	6	14
2. (OG.t.106a)	5	12
3. (s.w.2gt.6b)	3	10

Table 7. The most common feature combinations in On the Go (the first three) and Scene, and the number of times they appear in the books. The tasks in brackets are the same as in table 6, and can be used as reference points.

Focus on English differs slightly from *On the Go* and *Scene*. First of all, in the material there are only two combinations that appear more than two times, and these two combinations appear an equal number of times (4). The other most common combination (*fet.26.2*, a presentation) has a loose structure and interaction is optional, as the tasks in question are monologic (presentations). The task includes only written input, and the outcome is oral and written.

The most common feature combinations in *Focus on English* are presented in table 8 below.

Design feature	**Key dimension**		**fet.26.2**	**fet.60.2**
Input	Medium	pictorial	0	0
		oral	0	1
		written	1	1
	Organization	tight	0	1
		loose	1	0
Conditions	Information configuration	split	1	1
		shared	0	0
	Interactant relationship	one-way	1	0
		two-way	0	1
	Interaction requirement	required	0	1
		optional	1	0
	orientation	convergent	1	1
		divergent	0	0
Processes	Cognitive	exchanging information	1	1
		exchanging opinions	0	1
		explaining reasoning	0	1
	Discourse mode	monologic	1	0
		dialogic	0	1
Outcomes	Medium	pictorial	0	0
		oral	1	1
		written	1	0
	Scope	closed	1	1
		open	0	0
	Discourse scope	short	0	0
		extended	1	1
Task category			Short presentation	Discussion
The number of times the combination appears			4	4

Table 8. The most common feature combinations in Focus on English and the number of times they appear.

In the other most common combination, *fet.60.2*, the features are otherwise the same as in the most common combination of the Finnish materials, except that in *Focus on English*, the participants engage in a two-way interactant relationship, which allows for negotiation of meaning and more creative language use.

All in all, the *Focus on English* series has more variation in its feature combinations. As the other feature combinations appeared only once or twice, it is not as meaningful to look at further feature combinations.

To conclude, the number of different feature combinations per series are presented in table 9 below.

Material	All	On the Go	Focus on English	Scene
Number of times the most common feature combination appears	20	6	4	14
Number of different feature combinations	134	21	33	98
Number of tasks	240	34	47	159

Table 9. The number of times the most common feature combination appears, the number of different feature combinations in each material, and the total number of tasks.

Table 9 presents the number of times the most common feature combination appears in each series, the number of different types of feature combinations, and the total number of tasks. Note that while *Focus on English* includes a greater number of different feature combinations than *On the Go*, the number of times the most common combinations appear is less than in *On the Go*, which is also an indication of the greater variance in the task types in the Swedish series. This holds true, as the other combinations in *Focus on English* appeared only once or twice in the series, as was mentioned above.

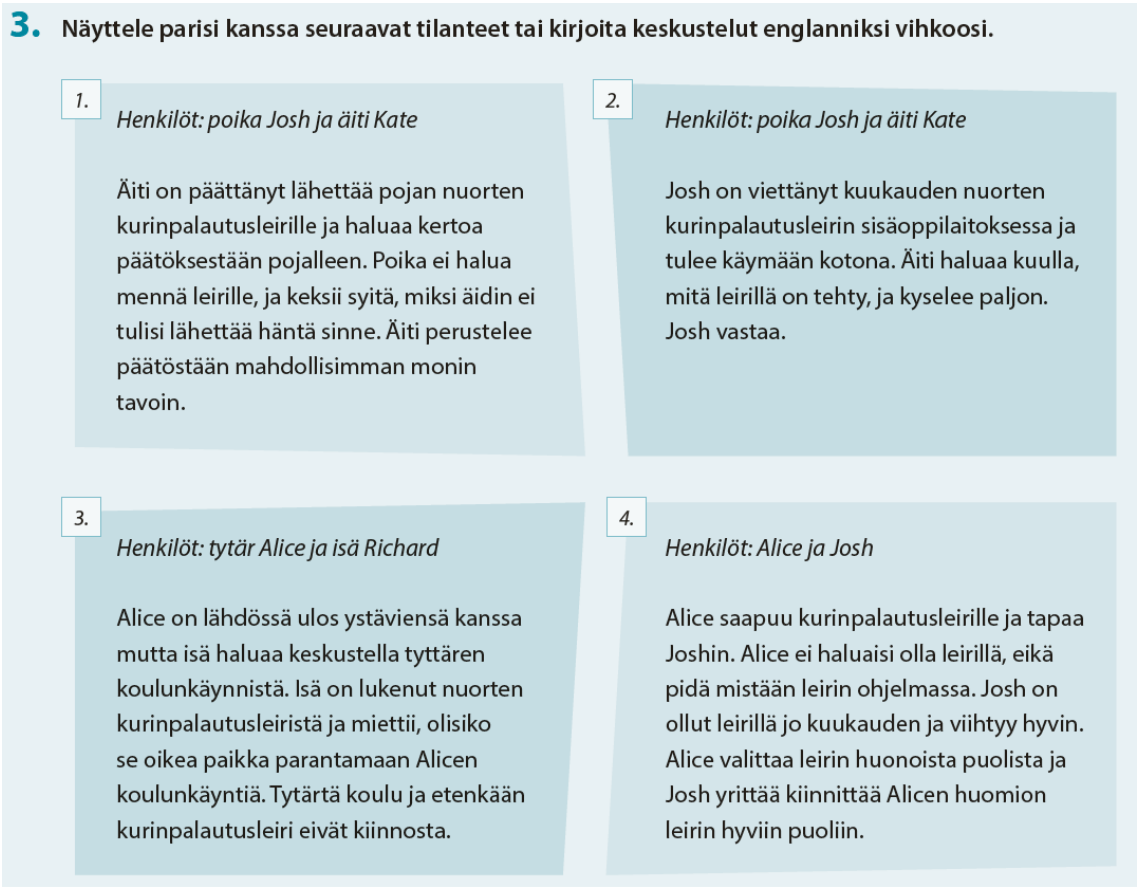
Question 4. How close to an ideal task are the tasks in the material?

The ideal task was introduced in subsection 2.3.5. The ideal task is, in a nutshell, one which provides pupils with an opportunity to use extended discourse and creativity in their learning, and to make autonomous decisions as to how the task should be completed. The ideal task also allows for pupils to properly discuss a topic, have shared knowledge of it, and provides space for negotiation of meaning. Input and output are multimodal.

To demonstrate how well the tasks in the analysis conform to the concept of an ideal task, the tasks are considered from the view of the *number of differences* between the features of the tasks in the materials and those of ideal tasks. This is one way of illustrating how similar or different they are to ideal tasks. Moreover, by identifying which features cause most discrepancies between the tasks in the material and ideal tasks, the results provide teachers and publishers with knowledge of what might be missing in the materials and what they could add to the tasks (and activities) in the materials.

To begin with, none of the tasks in the material are identical to an ideal task. The tasks closest to an ideal task differed by two features, whereas the tasks that differed most from an ideal task differed by 13 features. Note that the classification used in the analysis includes a total of 25 features, and that the greatest number of features a task could have differed by is 14. Therefore, neither the minimum or maximum number of differences was realized in the oral tasks of the studied material.

The tasks that were most similar to an ideal one were found in *Scene*. The workbook includes two tasks that differ by two features, and three tasks that differ by three features. The rest of the tasks differ by more than 5 features. In the textbook, there is only one task that differs by three features and another two tasks that differ by four features. The rest differ by more than 5 features. The features that caused most discrepancies between tasks in the material and ideal tasks were pictorial and written input and output.



3. **Näyttele parisi kanssa seuraavat tilanteet tai kirjoita keskustelut englanniksi vihkoosi.**

1. *Henkilöt: poika Josh ja äiti Kate*

Äiti on päättänyt lähettää pojan nuorten kurinpalautusleirille ja haluaa kertoa päätöksestään pojalleen. Poika ei halua mennä leirille, ja keksii syitä, miksi äidin ei tulisi lähettää häntä sinne. Äiti perustelee päätöstään mahdollisimman monin tavoin.

2. *Henkilöt: poika Josh ja äiti Kate*

Josh on viettänyt kuukauden nuorten kurinpalautusleirin sisäoppilaitoksessa ja tulee käymään kotona. Äiti haluaa kuulla, mitä leirillä on tehty, ja kyselee paljon. Josh vastaa.

3. *Henkilöt: tytär Alice ja isä Richard*

Alice on lähdössä ulos ystäviensä kanssa mutta isä haluaa keskustella tyttären koulunkäynnistä. Isä on lukenut nuorten kurinpalautusleiristä ja miettii, olisiko se oikea paikka parantamaan Alicen koulunkäyntiä. Tytärtä koulu ja etenkään kurinpalautusleiri eivät kiinnosta.

4. *Henkilöt: Alice ja Josh*

Alice saapuu kurinpalautusleirille ja tapaa Joshin. Alice ei haluaisi olla leirillä, eikä pidä mistään leirin ohjelmassa. Josh on ollut leirillä jo kuukauden ja viihtyy hyvin. Alice valittaa leirin huonoista puolista ja Josh yrittää kiinnittää Alicen huomion leirin hyviin puoliin.

Figure 4. An example of an ideal task from Scene (workbook: 104).

Figure 4 above is an example of a task close to an ideal task from *Scene*. The pupils are instructed to act out four different situations or write down the conversations in their

notebooks. The task differed by only two features: pictorial input and output.[30] Therefore, in order to increase pupils' skills in processing and producing multimodal text or information, teachers could also encourage the pupils to use pictorial output, although in this task the given situations might need other alternations as well.

In *Focus on English,* the fewest number of differences is found in two workbook tasks that differed by 4 features. All other tasks in the workbook and textbook differed by more than 5 features. In both, discrepancies were caused by pictorial input and output, written output, and divergent orientation.

In *On the Go,* only the textbook contains one task that differs by 5 features. All other tasks in the textbook and workbook differ by more than 5 features. The task that is closest to an ideal task does not include written input or output, pictorial output, a divergent orientation, nor is the information shared between the participants.

The fact that tasks lack a divergent orientation indicates that the pupils are not as such provided with tasks that encourage pupils to present arguments and counterarguments. The results indicate that when the tasks are put in use, in order to support the pupils' skills in further explanation of their own opinions and reasoning as well as in argumentative speech or debates, teachers should encourage the pupils to take on a divergent orientation as well.[31] A divergent orientation might also support gaining practice in the negotiation of meaning as well as discussion skills.

In the analysis, the position of the ideal tasks in the material was also looked into. The aim was to see if there are differences in where these tasks are located, that is, in the beginning, middle, or end of the books, but no such trends were found. The tasks divide quite evenly between the beginning, middle, and end of each book.

Also analyzed was the level of how the number of differences in features varies according to series, as well as how they compare in the Finnish and Swedish materials. To exemplify, figure 5 on the following page shows how the number of differences divides per series. The black bars for *On the Go* illustrate that most of the tasks included 8–10 differences, and only a small number of tasks had over 10 differences. For *Scene*, the differences divide more evenly, and the materials consist also of many tasks with 12–13

[30] Note that in the analysis, input and output are not limited in terms of *language*, i.e. they do not need to be in English.
[31] Note that more than a third of all tasks included exchanging opinions and explaining reasoning.

differences. *Focus on English* consists mostly of tasks that differ from the ideal task by 6–11 features.

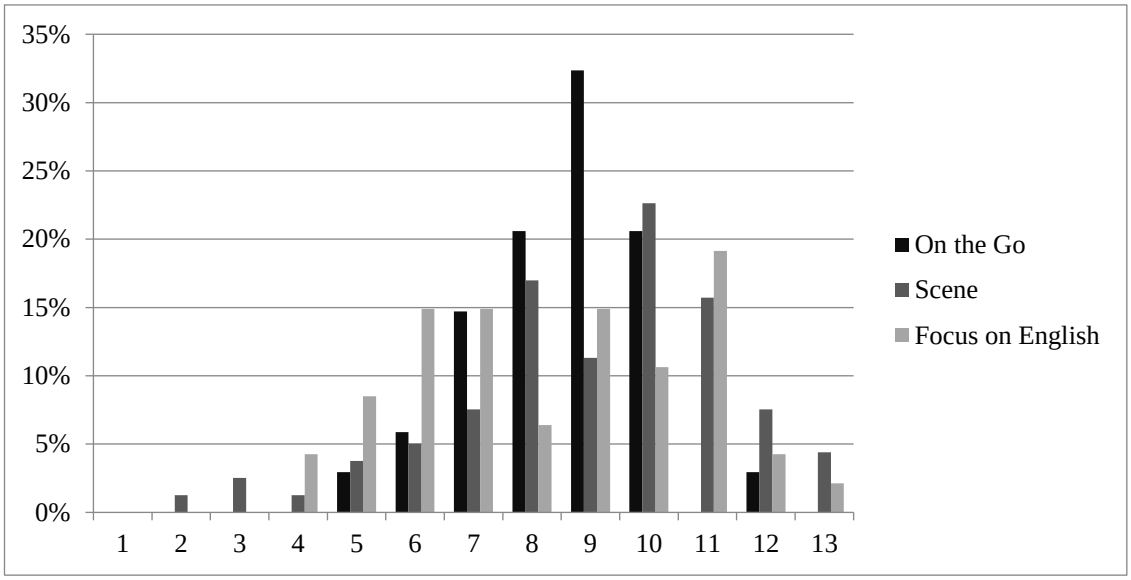


Figure 5. The distribution of the number of differences and their percentage shares per series. The x-axis contains the number of differences and the y-axis represents the share of tasks with a specific number of differences.

Figure 6 below illustrates the differences between the Finnish and Swedish materials. The figure indicates that in the Finnish series most of the tasks differ from ideal tasks by 8–11 features.

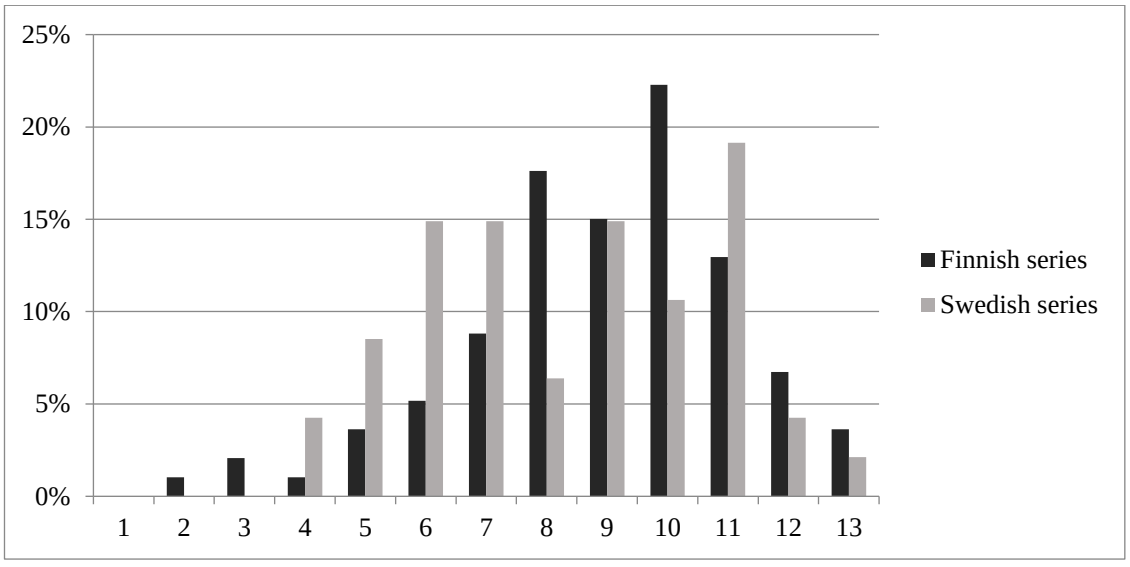


Figure 6. The distribution of the number of differences and their percentage shares for the Finnish series and Swedish series. The x-axis contains the number of differences and the y-axis represents the share of tasks with a specific number of differences.

To conclude, figure 6 shows that the Finnish learning materials include a larger number of tasks that are ‘more ideal’, as well as tasks that are farthest from the ideal task. That is,

both figures 5 and 6 illustrate that the Finnish materials contain a fair number of tasks that adhere to the principles of the renewed Finnish core curriculum. On the other hand, the tasks in *Focus on English* are missing many of features that an ideal task includes.

Before continuing to the discussion, the main findings presented in this subsection are summarized in the following bullet points:

- The greatest number of oral activities and tasks was found in *Scene.* The largest share of tasks was found in *Focus on English*. The lowest number and share of tasks was found in *On the Go*.
- Seven different oral task categories were identified in the materials. *Scene* includes all 7 categories, whereas *Focus on English* includes the smallest number of categories (5).
- Most variance was found in exchanging opinions and discourse scope (short/extended). The least variance was found in exchanging information, and convergent orientation. *Focus on English* showed the most variance.
- The Finnish materials are very similar to one another and differ mostly by interaction requirement and written input. The features in which all materials are most alike are the conditions (split/shared), orientation, cognitive processes, output, and discourse scope.
- The features by which the Swedish materials differ most from the Finnish materials are input organization (tight/loose), interactant relationship (one-way/two-way), and discourse scope (short/extended).
- The Finnish materials are very similar to each other in terms of the most common feature combinations. This also holds true for those of *Focus on English*, which differ from those of the Finnish materials mostly only by the interactant relationship.
- Features that cause most discrepancies between the tasks in the materials and ideal tasks are input, output, and divergent orientation.
- *Scene* includes tasks which are closest to ideal tasks.
- The Finnish materials include tasks which are very close to an ideal task, as well as many that are very different from one. The Swedish material mostly consists of tasks that differ from ideal tasks by rather many features.

5.2 Discussion

The present study focused on three seventh grade EFL learning materials *On the Go*, *Scene*, and *Focus on English*. This subsection divides into two further subsections. First discussed are the results of the study in light of the research questions. The discussion ends with a comparison to previous studies.

The aim of the study was to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the share of oral activities and oral tasks in the lower secondary school 7th grade learning materials *On the Go 1*, *Scene 1*, and *Focus on English 7*?
2. How can the tasks be described in light of task-based language learning and teaching?
3. What similarities and differences can be found between the oral tasks in Finnish and Swedish learning materials?
4. In relation to the renewed Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, how similar to an ideal task are the tasks in the material?

5.2.1 The Finnish and Swedish learning materials

In this discussion, provided first is a summary of the Finnish materials, which is followed by a comparison of the Finnish and Swedish materials.

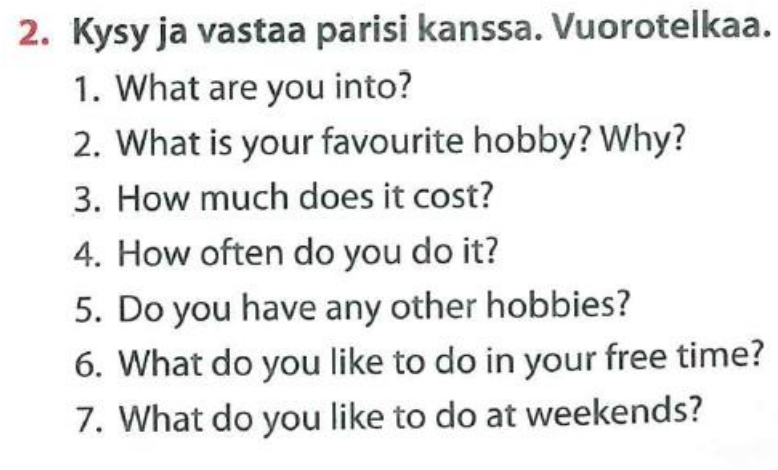
The results show that at least a third of all the oral activities in the Finnish learning materials are tasks. In the textbooks, the share of tasks is approximately 40 %. *Scene* contains over three times the number of oral activities in *On the* Go, as well as a larger percentage share of tasks than the *On the Go* series. The differences are more marked in the workbooks. *Scene* also includes a greater number of different task categories. The results indicate that *Scene* provides pupils with a wider variety of tasks. Therefore, the teachers (and pupils) have more material from which to choose tasks that they deem important to focus on. For example, they may choose tasks that support the development of different aspects of oral skills, such as discussion or presentation skills, or for example dialogic tasks in order to support the development of interaction skills.

The variance in different features in the Finnish materials is very similar. In both series, the workbooks are more varied than the textbooks. Also, in both series the same features vary most: input organization and exchanging opinions, and discourse scope. That is, they vary in terms of whether a task is tight or loose (for example, predetermined questions in

contrast to presentations), whether the tasks engages in exchanging opinions, and whether the pupils produce short or extended discourse.

When comparing the percentage shares of individual features, it is apparent that in the present material, the differences are minimal. The most marked differences are found in interaction requirement: whereas in *On the Go* 85 % of tasks require interactions, in *Scene* the share is only 72 %. This is due to the task category, as *Scene* includes a large number of (long and short) presentations, which do not require interaction. *On the Go* includes only 5 presentations whereas the rest of the tasks are dialogues. It should be noted that the Finnish curriculum emphasizes the development of both interactive and independent oral skills.

The two most common feature combinations in the Finnish materials are identical, and the third most common differs by two features. The task types the feature combinations piece together are ones that are dialogic and engage pupils in one-way exchange of information. That is, pupils do not freely *discuss* a given topic, but go through predetermined questions in pairs. Figure 7 below is an example of such a feature combination, an interview.



2. Kysy ja vastaa parisi kanssa. Vuorotelkaa.

1. What are you into?
2. What is your favourite hobby? Why?
3. How much does it cost?
4. How often do you do it?
5. Do you have any other hobbies?
6. What do you like to do in your free time?
7. What do you like to do at weekends?

Figure 7. An example of the most common feature combination in *On the Go* and *Scene* (Scene textbook: 33). A translation of the instructions: In pairs, ask and answer [the questions below]. Take turns.

Therefore, the results show that the Finnish materials are very similar to one another in terms of oral tasks. A notable difference is in the number of oral activities the materials include: *Scene* contains thrice the number of tasks that *On the Go* does. On the other hand, the percentage shares of tasks in *Scene* are almost the same as those of *On the Go*. The

results therefore show that although the *number* of tasks may vary, the share of tasks remains constant.

However, considering that the Finnish core curriculum emphasizes authenticity, as well as creative and meaningful language use (as tasks do), one might assume the share of tasks to be greater. What the results then also show is that the tasks may need modifying in classroom use, especially if they are to support the pupils' skills in dealing with communication breakdowns. After all, if the pupils merely engage in asking each other rather simple predetermined questions, as in figure 7 on the previous page ("3. How much does it cost?"), the task does not leave much room for creative language use, or for actual communication breakdowns to occur. On the other hand, were the tasks to include more shared knowledge (information configuration, split/shared), the tasks might engage more extensively in exchanging opinions or arguments, instead of mere information exchange.

Another noteworthy difference between the Finnish materials lies in how close the tasks in these two series are to ideal tasks. While *Scene* contains 5 tasks that differ by less than 5 features, all the tasks in *On the Go* differed by 5 or more features. In both series, the discrepancies were caused by the absence of the same features, namely pictorial and written input and output. The results the study suggest that, at least when it comes to oral activities, the focus is on oral production, not varied, multimodal production.

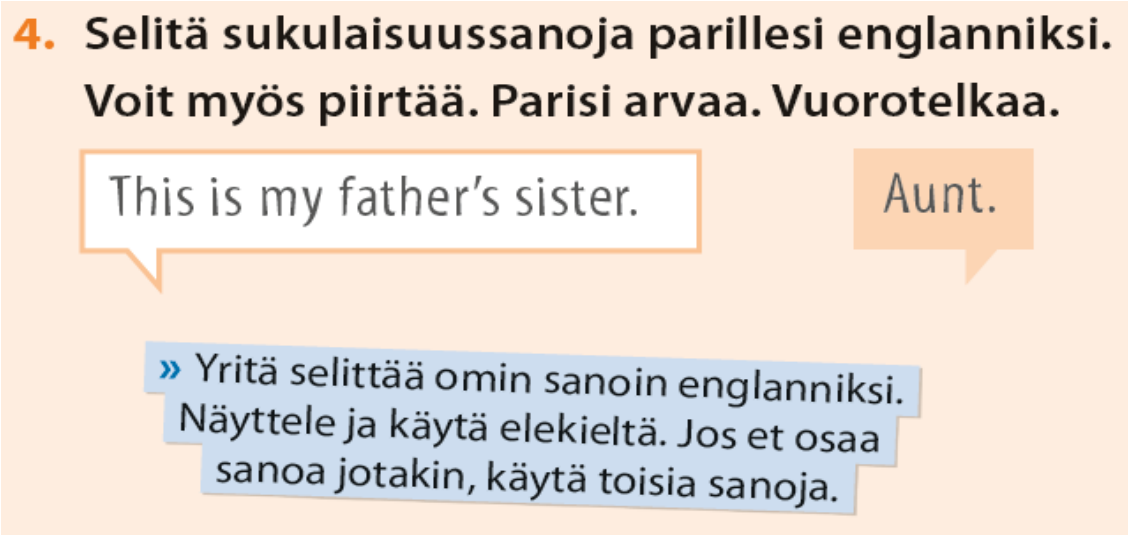


Figure 8. An example of a task from Scene (textbook: 7).

Therefore, especially in terms of output, the oral tasks seem to follow a traditional distinction of language skills: oral vs. written skills. However, for example writing or drawing (or gestures) could be made use of when compensating for communication

breakdowns – there is therefore no restriction to encouraging the use of drawings as support for oral production, as in the task in figure 8 on the previous page. To complete the task, pupils are instructed to describe vocabulary to their partner, and they may also make use of drawings to enhance comprehension. Figure 8 is a good example of how to modify and improve tasks to render them more multimodal.

Also interesting in the tasks found in *Scene* is how pupils are encouraged to use Finnish if they find expressing their message in English too difficult. In subsections 2.3.5 and 3.1, it was noted that the Finnish core curriculum emphasizes the parallel use of two languages in order to ease communication (in a foreign language), which also supports the pupils' growth into multilingualism. That is, the publishers of *Scene* have managed to integrate two key features, multimodality and the parallel use of languages, of the new curriculum into their renewed learning materials, whereas the publishers of *On the Go* have not. Neither multimodality nor the parallel use of languages show in *Focus on English*, though it is not mentioned in the Swedish curriculum either. It should be noted, however, that as mentioned in subsection 3.1, the CEFR and the language policy of the Council of Europe guide education in both Finland and Sweden. One could therefore assume that multimodality and the parallel use of languages were to show in both curricula and learning materials, as for example the negotiation of meaning does.

As the Finnish learning materials are so similar, it is interesting how different they are from the Swedish learning materials. To begin with, half of the oral activities in *Focus on English* are tasks. While the percentage share of tasks in the workbook is very close to that of *Scene* (a difference of only 2 percentage points), the difference in the textbooks is more pronounced: 60 % of the oral activities are tasks, whereas in the Finnish learning materials, the corresponding share was only 40 %.

Therefore, it seems that contrary to the Finnish materials, the Swedish learning materials include more activities that are based on authentic language use, and less of others. On the other hand, *Focus on English* contained the fewest *number* of oral activities, and also the fewest number of task categories. While it is difficult to account for how much Swedish pupils get oral practice in comparison to Finnish pupils, it can at the least be noted that in terms of learning materials, they are exposed to a more limited array of tasks.

When looking at the variance of individual features in the Swedish learning materials, the number of features that have a notable variance is less than that of Finnish materials. This

is another indication of the fact that the tasks in *Focus on English* are more similar to one another in terms of task features. Especially the interaction requirement and discourse mode vary because of the large share of presentations in the Swedish learning materials – almost 40 % of the tasks were short presentations. Also, in contrast to the Finnish materials, in *Focus on English* the textbook is more varied than the workbook.

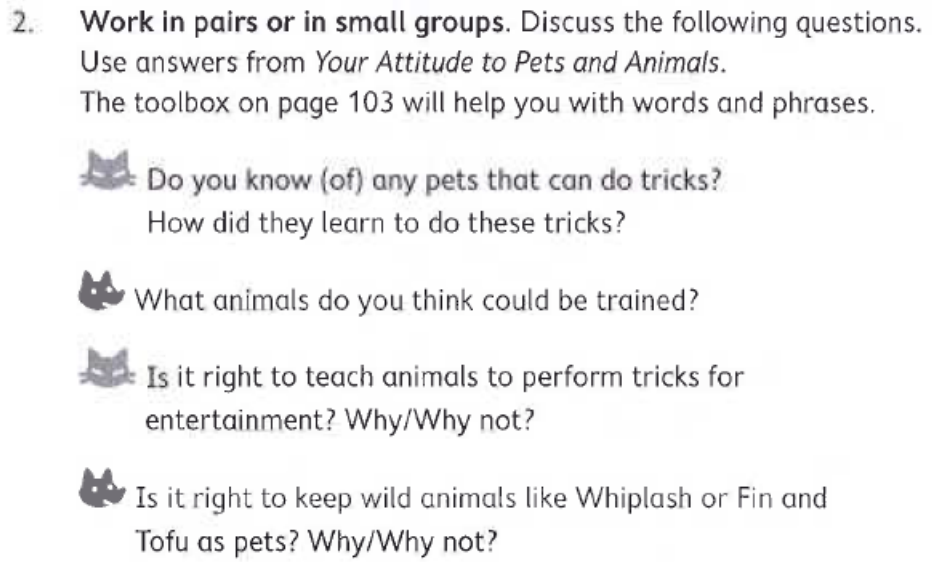
Table 5 on page 49 illustrated the similarities between the Finnish and Swedish learning materials in the percentage share of each feature. It is evident that while the Finnish materials are very similar to one another, they are rather different from the Swedish one. Differences arise in the input type and organization (tight/loose), the interactant relationship (one-way/two-way), discourse mode (monologic/dialogic), and discourse scope (short/extended). As to the input, the Swedish materials include less pictorial and oral input – that is, input is mainly written, mostly on account of the large share of presentations, for which pupils are given (merely) written instructions. On a similar note, the Swedish materials contain a large share of monologic tasks. This is somewhat contradictory to the Swedish curriculum, which emphasizes interaction and the ability to participate in various communicational situations, as well as coping with communication breakdowns. In fact, as was presented in table 4 on page 47, the textbook of *Focus on English* contains more monologic presentations than interactive discussion tasks.

To continue reviewing the differences between the Finnish and Swedish materials, the tasks in the Finnish materials tend to be of a tight structure due to the vast number of interviews and tasks in which pupils ask each other questions about the text. In the Swedish materials, tight and loose tasks divide quite equally, as does the interactant relationship of the tasks. Also, the Swedish tasks engage pupils mostly in extended discourse. The aforementioned differences, especially in the interactant relationship, are due to the larger share of discussion tasks (discussed on the following page) in the Swedish materials. Extended discourse is prominent also due to the number of presentations in the material. The more extended the discourse is, the more opportunities there are for creative and autonomous language use.

Therefore, the tasks in Swedish materials are in this way closer to tasks that support pupils in reaching the objectives stated in the *Finnish* curriculum. Also, the tasks themselves adhere to the conception of learning of the curriculum – the tasks allow them to engage in more creative language use and negotiation of meaning. However, they include less

interaction, a prominent feature in both the Finnish and Swedish curricula. Nevertheless, both curricula state that also oral production that excludes interaction, such as presentations, is a skill that pupils should learn.

The two most common feature combinations in *Focus on English* appear an identical number of times and can be categorized as presentations and discussion tasks. The former is monologic and does not require interaction. An example of a discussion task is presented in figure 9 below.



2. **Work in pairs or in small groups**. Discuss the following questions. Use answers from *Your Attitude to Pets and Animals*. The toolbox on page 103 will help you with words and phrases.

- Do you know (of) any pets that can do tricks? How did they learn to do these tricks?
- What animals do you think could be trained?
- Is it right to teach animals to perform tricks for entertainment? Why/Why not?
- Is it right to keep wild animals like Whiplash or Fin and Tofu as pets? Why/Why not?

Figure 9. One of the most common feature combinations in Focus on English, a discussion task (workbook: 29).

The discussion tasks in the Swedish materials are almost identical to the most common feature combinations in the Finnish learning materials. The difference is in the interactant relationship. Whereas the Finnish learning materials include one-way interviews, *Focus on English* includes two-way discussions. That is, while the Finnish learning materials engage pupils in transferring information (and opinions) to one another, the Swedish material encourages pupils to discuss topics in groups or pairs and to make use of useful phrases to support communication. A discussion task may also require more negotiation of meaning as well as dealing with communication breakdowns, both of which were emphasized as learning objectives in the curricula.

To conclude, the results show that the Swedish learning material include a larger share of tasks. The tasks in the Swedish material are more similar to one another, meaning that pupils using the Finnish learning materials are introduced to a wider variety of tasks, as well as a greater number of oral tasks and activities. The tasks in the Swedish materials

are more loose on account of the task categories that occur, namely presentations and discussion tasks. In reference to the discussion tasks, the tasks in the Swedish material engage pupils in negotiation for meaning (i.e. a two-way interactant relationship) more often than those of the Finnish learning materials.

The Finnish materials include a larger number of dialogic tasks, as the materials consist of many interviews and tasks involving descriptive discourse, in which pupils describe for example animals to each other. The dialogic tasks, however, engage pupils in exchanging information and opinions, and not in negotiating meaning. On the other hand, the Swedish material includes a larger share of monologic tasks due to the vast amount of short presentations, as well as a larger share of tasks with a closed outcome. Also, in the Swedish materials the discourse scope is often extended. Therefore, in order to support the pupils' skills in constructing a discussion in which participants engage also in exchanging opinions, explaining reasoning, and negotiating meaning, the Finnish materials could be enhanced by inserting into the materials activities such as the discussion tasks in the Swedish material.

In reference to the ideal task, the most differences arise in how much freedom the pupils are given in the completion of the task, as well as the type of input they receive and output they produce. To recapitulate, ideal tasks provide pupils with an opportunity to use extended discourse and creativity in their learning, and to make autonomous decision as to how the task should be completed. The ideal task also allows for pupils to properly discuss a topic, have shared knowledge of it, and provides space for negotiation of meaning. Input and output are multimodal.

Although the results indicate that the Finnish materials mostly include tasks that are not of the ideal type, the Finnish materials are the ones that include tasks which are closest to an ideal one.[32] According to the publishers, the Finnish learning materials were developed in line with the renewed national curriculum, which emphasizes engaging pupils in a specific sort of activity to promote their learning, something along the lines of the ideal task introduced in this thesis. The results of the present study indicate that the publishers have included aspects of the new curriculum in their renewed learning materials. In addition, all the activities studied in this thesis are tasks which inherently adhere to the

[32] Cf. table 9 on page 54 for the most common feature combinations and figure 6 on page 57 for the distribution of the number of differences.

principles that the curriculum promotes, such as authenticity and putting languages to use. It must be noted that an analysis on oral tasks alone is not sufficient to determine whether learning materials truly are 'in line' with the current curriculum, but can certainly be used as an indicator of such.

Also noteworthy is how close to an ideal task all the tasks in a given series were as a whole. While in the figures for the Finnish materials one can see high peaks in for example tasks that differ by 8–10 features (see figure 6 on page 57), the Swedish material shows only one peak at 11 differences. That is, in the Swedish series, the number of differences is distributed much more evenly, which is most likely due to the fact that most of the tasks in the Swedish materials are quite different from one another. To further elaborate, the Swedish materials include only such tasks which would need more modifying, were they used to support the sort of learning the *Finnish* curriculum strives to promote. On the other hand, the Finnish materials also include such tasks, as well as many tasks which would not require much modifying, that is, they differ from an ideal task by only a few features.

It must be noted that the differences in this respect cannot be used to claim that one series is 'better' or 'promotes more effective learning' than another series. Further research should be conducted on how activities function as a whole, on the role of tasks and other activities in the learning process, and how tasks in learning materials are actually realized in the learning situation, to name but a few. In addition, this thesis does not claim that all activities should be tasks, or that they should all resemble ideal tasks. Instead, this thesis makes a *suggestion* as to what learning materials *could* include, and provides both teachers and publishers with information on the sort of tasks the materials now consist of.

5.2.2 Comparison to previous studies

As previous studies by Hietala (2013) and Salminen (2013) (introduced in subsection 2.4) focused on Finnish learning materials, it was decided that in this study their results be compared primarily to the Finnish learning materials.

In this study, the percentage share of tasks in the Finnish learning materials was found to be 41 %. In *On the Go,* the share of tasks was 33 % and in *Scene* 43 %. Hietala (2013) found that 30 % of oral activities were tasks in *Open Road,* and 19 % in *ProFiles* (Hietala 2013: 107). Therefore, in this study all the learning materials included a larger share of tasks than the materials that contained the most tasks in Hietala's study. That is, the results

show that the learning materials for lower-secondary school contain a larger share of tasks than upper-secondary school materials. This raises the question of *why* upper-secondary materials would include *fewer* oral tasks. It should be noted that the materials Hietala studied are ones that followed the previous curriculum of 2003. The results show that in renewing the materials to follow the new curriculum for basic education, publishers have taken into account also the activity type in the materials for 7th graders.

Hietala concludes that the tasks in her data can all be categorized as problem-solving and negotiation activities, research projects, presentations, or discussions (Hietala 2013*:* 76–77; 103). Similar categories were found in the data collected for this study, although the discussion category functioned as an umbrella term for also problem-solving and negotiation tasks.[33] Hietala made use of the same definition of tasks as was used in this thesis, which denotes that the same criteria were used, or should have been used, to identify tasks. However, if one compares the task categories that Hietala found for tasks to the categories that Salminen (2013, discussed below) found for oral activities, and these to the categories found in the present data, the results indicate that Hietala may not have identified similar types of activities as tasks as in this study.

For example, the categories role-play and word explanation (or descriptive discourse in the present study) were found in the data in this study, but not in that of Hietala's study. For example, in her study Hietala offers an example of the 'vocabulary' category (Hietala 2013: 97). While Hietala does not categorize this activity as a task, it does satisfy the criteria of one, and would have been identified as a task in this thesis.

Therefore, a comparison of the present study and that of Hietala's illustrates the challenges of research on activities in learning materials – even if two researchers follow the same definition of tasks, the interpretation and identification of different activity types and activity categories may differ. Research on learning materials therefore demands an even more systematized way of identifying and categorizing tasks and activities in order for further studies to be comparable to one another.

Salminen (2013) studied oral activities in respect to how they support the development of communicative competence as well as how communicativeness presents itself in the data. Salminen (2013) did not separate tasks from other activities. Like Hietala, also Salminen

[33] Hietala also gave research projects their own category. For this study it was decided that they be categorized as presentations, as the oral part of a research project is, in fact, a presentation.

studied the *ProFiles* series. In addition to the discussion category mentioned by Hietala, Salminen also found the categories dialog, role-play, interview, word explanation, retelling a text, debate, speech, and game for the oral activities in her study (Salminen 2013: 55). The aforementioned categories match those found in the present study for tasks, except for dialogues which were not all identified as tasks, as some of them were merely translation (*ibid*: 36).

Over 75 % of the tasks in the current thesis included oral and/or written input. Oral input was more common, and although it was not explicitly discussed in the results section, oral input is common due to the vast number of tasks that include predetermined questions the pupils ask one another – a point which also Salminen makes (Salminen 2013: 55). Salminen also studied communicativeness by analyzing output. Written output was found to be less frequent in oral activities in both studies (*ibid.*). Output in general was, in both studies, more often extended discourse rather than short. Salminen, however, mentions that "students are always encouraged to produce their own versions of the text" (Salminen 2013: 55), which in the present study was found to hold true for only the Swedish learning materials. These encouraging phrases took the form of, for example, "feel free to add your own phrases" (*Scene*, textbook: 11).

6. Conclusion

In Finland, foreign language learning and teaching has taken a turn towards pedagogy that promotes authenticity and interaction. The focus in foreign language teaching has turned towards improving pupils' oral skills. According to the new national core curriculum, languages are no longer learned for the mere sake of acquiring a language. Instead, teaching is to provide pupils with genuine language skills that they can use in authentic interaction of everyday life. Even though functional, communicative, and authenticity-based language learning has been emphasized in the research field of second language acquisition, language teaching in schools has remained rather traditional, and learning materials still play a major role in teaching.

The aim of this paper was to study how the learning materials for 7th graders support the development of oral skills in accordance with task-based learning and the new national core curriculum. The 7th graders have been following the new curriculum as of fall 2017. Previous research has mainly focused on upper secondary learning materials, and hence a study on lower secondary materials was called for. The primary research method was content analysis, which in this study included both quantitative and qualitative methods. The theoretical framework chosen for this study was task-based language learning. The tasks were analyzed and described according to a categorization by Ellis (2003). The framework and categorization were used for identifying and describing oral tasks in the 7th grade English learning materials *On the Go 1*, *Scene 1*, and *Focus on English 7*. The Swedish material, *Focus on English,* was chosen to provide a fresh perspective to analysis on learning materials.

The results showed that almost 43 % of all the oral activities in the materials were tasks. In the Finnish series, approximately a third of the oral activities are tasks, which is more than a previous study (Hietala 2013) has shown. The differences in the percentage shares of tasks in the present study and that of Hietala (2013) may be due to the fact that curricula were renewed in 2014 and 2015 for basic education and upper secondary education, respectively. Publishers may have added new elements to their materials in order to

ensure their materials conform to the principles of new curricula, and in that way, perhaps also increase the number of tasks in their learning materials.[34]

The results also showed that the learning materials consist of a wide array of different tasks – a total of 134 different feature combinations. The most common feature combinations include varied input, are of a tight structure, and are mainly dialogues which engage the pupils in transferring information to one another. The output is mostly oral (and not pictorial or written) and extended. The outcome of the tasks is usually closed, which denotes that pupils are not as such encouraged to be creative with how they complete the tasks. An example of such a task would be one in which pupils interview one another by going through predetermined questions which require more than simple yes or no answers, but do not as such promote more extensive discussion.

While a task of this type supports the development of oral skills, as well as allows for interaction and the use of language for an outcome other than simple language learning, it lacks a creative characteristic which is a prominent feature in the Finnish curriculum. Also, it does not support gaining practice in negotiation of meaning, that is, a discussion in which the participants together construct and develop the activity.

The study showed that there are differences in the Finnish and Swedish materials. Whereas the tasks in the former adhere to the sort of task described above, the tasks in the Swedish material differ somewhat. The most common tasks are presentations and discussion tasks. Presentations do not require interaction and are monologic, whereas the tasks described above had opposite features. Discussion tasks, on the other hand, mostly engage in a two-way interactant relationship which allows for negotiation of meaning and a wider array of cognitive processes than presentations.

In general, the task categories described above appear to account for the differences between the tasks in Finnish and Swedish learning materials. While the tasks in the Finnish materials contain more dialogue, those of the Swedish material are more monologic and loose. It is important to note that as over half of the oral activities in the Swedish series were tasks, this thesis has provided a rather thorough look on the type of oral activities that are found in the Swedish material. In the Finnish materials, only 30–

[34] The Finnish Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Education is not discussed in this paper, but it should be noted that it reflects the same concepts of learning as the curriculum for basic education does. For more on the former, see FNBE 2016b.

40 % of all oral activities were analyzed in this thesis as the rest were not identified as tasks. Therefore, this study does not provide a comprehensive outline of all the types of oral activities that the Finnish materials contain.

The fourth and last research question was a more experimental and qualitative one that looked at ideal tasks, which is a concept that was constructed for this thesis on the basis of the Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014. To begin with, the most common feature combinations introduced above are, in many ways, different from the ideal task type. Whereas the most common combinations provide a tight structure around the task, and do not encourage or grant leeway for how the tasks should be completed, the ideal task does just that. The results show that the material does not offer any tasks of the ideal type, and that the features which cause most differences are a divergent orientation and varied input and output. The orientation of a task, however, was difficult to determine, but it can be said that only few tasks in the material as a whole explicitly encouraged pupils to practice presenting also contradictory arguments. As to the output of the tasks, the results indicate that oral (ideal) tasks promote the development of oral skills by focusing on oral output – not, for example, on oral output alongside other media of output. Teachers should therefore strive to encourage pupils to make use of also other media, as well as to modify activities in such a way that they allow pupils to complete them in diverse, creative ways.

The curriculum aims to provide pupils with materials that engage them in real-world problems in which they can use language for reasons other than just to learn the language. The teaching that follows should encourage pupils to try to communicate and convey meanings regardless of their proficiency level in a given language. This was especially pronounced in *Scene*, which was the only set of learning materials that encouraged pupils to make use of multimodal methods of conveying meanings, as well as encouraged them to use other languages as support for communication when their English skills fell short. The way in which these details were integrated into the materials was subtle, but manages to have an immense impact on the learning situation. The features help prepare pupils for situations in life where they need other means of communication, which will most probably surface at one point or another in life. It is therefore strongly advisable that other publishers do the same.

The overall large share of oral tasks in the Finnish materials shows that their impact on learning has been recognized. However, especially in the Finnish materials, negotiation of meaning, a prominent concept in the Finnish curriculum, is rather scarce in the learning materials. In order for the materials to promote the curriculum's concept of learning, a more extensive inclusion of tasks which encourage pupils to truly discuss matters, is called for. The analysis of the Swedish material shows that elsewhere 7th graders' learning materials consist mainly of presentations and discussion tasks – a point which could be taken into consideration in later learning material publications. Especially the discussion tasks in the Swedish material are ones that support creative and autonomous use of language, as well as negotiation of meaning.

The present study was an attempt to provide a valid basis to build on in research conducted on oral tasks. As was noted in subsection 2.4, studies similar or comparable to the present one are scarce (Hietala 2013: 38–39, Kangaspunta 2004: 78). Therefore, more studies should be conducted in order to support the development of one the most widely used tools in teaching, i.e. learning materials. The most significant limitation to the study was that it was conducted by one person only. This affected the reliability of the study, as the identification of tasks as well as a set of principles relating to the research design were determined by one person. It is recommended that a study such as the present be conducted in pairs or groups of researchers. In addition, a larger research group would also allow to conduct the study on a larger set of data.

The methodology made use of in this thesis is new at least in terms of studies on Finnish learning materials. The method that was used allows for a more systematic, multilayered analysis of tasks. As a result, it also requires a rather strenuous effort. All in all, the method, both the modified framework and the quantitative analysis, provide insight into much more detailed information of tasks than the traditional qualitative methods made use of in previous studies. For example, while describing and abstracting tasks into feature combinations is a rather abstract starting point to an analysis of learning materials, the results are easily generalized to such a level that they indicate concrete pedagogical implications for classrooms, teachers, and publishers. In addition, the basis of the analysis was numerical data which does not leave as much room for subjective interpretations, which is a more prominent issue in research that is mainly qualitative.

Further research with an identical research design should be conducted on 8th and 9th grade materials, as well as on materials from other education levels (e.g. primary and upper secondary). It would be interesting to study whether the share of tasks increases in for example 8th and 9th grade materials. Also, as Ellis (2014: 108) notes that especially input-based tasks (i.e. not production tasks) should be used for also beginner-level learners, it would be interesting to study when tasks, input-based or output-based, are first introduced to learners. In addition, the role of online materials should be studied.

In addition, it would be interesting to hear the publishers' take on the content of their material, and how they see the role of tasks. For example, one aspect of research could be to study the publishers' take on tasks. Should (oral) tasks make up a larger share of the activities in learning materials? To refer back to tasks designed for beginner-level learners, what is the publishers' view of the matter? Do they require too much of younger learners, or are they already used in all learner levels? Also, in what way do publishers decide on the content of their materials, and how do they take recent studies on their publications into consideration?

Another perspective to research would be to further explore the role of so-called supporting activities, such as drills and exercises. On that note, what combination of supporting activities and tasks would be most optimal for learning and teaching foreign languages? In addition, it would be interesting to study teachers' attitudes towards using tasks, as well as how learning materials are used in practice: How and what methods do teachers apply in schools?

As is evident, the field calls for more research from several different angles. The aim or end result of such studies is the development of language learning and teaching. While it is difficult to predict how the role and use of learning materials will change in the future, it may be safe to say that the current situation will not undergo any dramatic changes in the next ten years or so. Also, as the Finnish core curriculum has just been renewed, it is possible (or likely) that also publishers will renew their learning materials on several occasions in the following years. It is therefore hoped that studies such as the current one are taken into account in the planning of the materials to come.

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Appendix 1: Description of the materials

On the Go 1

On the Go 1 is a new textbook series by Sanoma Pro. The textbook consists of six units, each unit comprising seven different elements: 'start', 'study', 'talk', 'know', and 'your choice'. 'Start' is a warm-up text to the unit which familiarizes the learner with the current theme. 'Study' is the main text of the unit, and is followed by activities concerning the content of the text. 'Talk' entails listening comprehension activities, listen-and-repeat activities, as well as pair work activities. 'Know' consists of vocabulary relating to a specific theme, and 'your choice' includes supplementary texts and activities such as games and quizzes.

There are four different activity types in the textbook, and each type occurs once in each unit: 'listen', 'listen and repeat', work with a partner', and 'act out'. 'Work with a partner' can be divided into three further subcategories, which in this thesis are given labels according to their content: 'questions and discussion', 'question and answer', and 'other'. The first entails questions regarding the content of the previous text, and is followed by discussion topics for pair work. The second also requires working in pairs, but only obligates the learners to ask each other questions about the text and does not encourage further discussion on the topic. 'Other' refers to activities which include for example translation and reading aloud. The textbook also includes a 'reference section' for useful details, such as prepositions, numerals, and pronunciation instruction, as well as an alphabetical English – Finnish vocabulary at the end of the book.

The workbook consists of ten different elements: 'words', 'start', 'study', 'learn', 'listen', 'write', 'talk', 'choose', 'your choice', and 'think'. 'Words' account for the vocabulary used in the textbook texts. This section also offers advice on ways to learn new words. 'Start' appears at the beginning of each unit, and consists of activities relating to the theme of the textbook unit in question. 'Study', on the other hand, includes activities regarding the content of the textbook unit, as well as provides practice in new vocabulary, phrases, and linguistic forms that are introduced in the textbook. 'Listen' consists of listening comprehension activities with related activities in the textbook, whereas 'learn' includes grammar instruction and activities. In 'write' learners are offered two essay titles or themes from which to write a composition.

‘Talk’ is divided into two parts: talk and pronunciation. The section consists of activities relating to spoken language – that is, the activities themselves do not always require spoken production, but rather offer practice in useful phrases and listening comprehension skills. Some of the ‘talk’ sections also include activities which require pair work and dialogues. The ‘choose’ section appears in the workbook on only four occasions, each one consisting of four activities regarding for example vocabulary. ‘Your choice’ includes a vocabulary list for the texts appearing in the ‘your choice’ section of the textbook, as well as a wide array of activities relating to the content of the texts. ‘Think’ is a self-assessment task, which provides learners with opportunities to evaluate their own language use, learning. and learning skills.

The workbook also provides five helpful illustrations beside some of the activities to mark them as specific activity types: (1) A headphone set refers to listening activities, (2) a picture of two people is a pair work activity, (3) a picture of a globe implies that the activity requires searching for information on the matter at hand, (4) a picture of a globe with a text box beside it marks an activity in which learners search for information on the specific word in question, and (5) a picture of gadgets and posters depicts a presentation activity.

Scene 1

Scene 1 is a textbook series by Otava. The textbook consists of six units, each unit consisting of seven elements: ‘kick-start’, ‘text’, ‘more than words’, ‘in action’, ‘Get this!’, ‘FlexiText’, and ‘culture’. ‘Kick-start’ includes warm-up questions to the theme of the following unit. Each unit contains two texts (‘text’) and one ‘FlexiText’, which is a supplementary text that learners may go through independently or within a group.

The remaining four elements are different activity types: ‘More than words’ includes vocabulary relating to the theme of each unit, as well as vocabulary activities. ‘In action’ is an extension of the previous activities and consists of more interactive activities. ‘Get this!’ introduces grammar rules and offers related activities. ‘Culture’ is a pair or group work activity and is situated at the end of each unit. In each culture activity, learners search for information about a given country or area and may give a presentation to the class. In addition to these four, the textbook also includes a fifth activity type, ‘time to talk’, which includes various oral activities.

The textbook also includes one further, longer piece of text (‘extra reading’), a reference section (‘Got it?’) which includes for examples grammar rules and pronunciation instruction, and alphabetical English – Finnish and Finnish – English vocabularies.

The workbook consists of the same elements as the textbook: ‘text’, ‘more than words’, Get this!’, and ‘FlexiText’. ‘Text’ contains a vocabulary list relating to the two texts in the textbook, as well as activities relating to the text and vocabulary in question. ‘More than words’ entails activities relating to the theme vocabulary introduced in each textbook unit. ‘Get this!’ focuses especially on the grammar rules introduced in the textbook. The ‘FlexiText’ section includes activities regarding the content and vocabulary of the FlexiText texts in the textbook.

In addition to these categories, the workbook also makes use of six different markers placed beside some the activities, which signify different ways of completing the activity. A star is a marker for supplementary activities, while a diamond marks more challenging ones. The four markers are the words ‘listen’, ‘go online’ (use the online material), ‘show and tell’ (a presentation), and ‘Action!’ (pair or group work). In addition to these, after each ‘Get this!’ section, there is a self-assessment activity that the learner may complete.

Focus on English 7

Focus on English 7 is a publication of Liber. The textbook consists of 10 theme-related units, and each unit includes 4–6 texts. The only elements that are included in every unit are ‘Picture this’ activities that aim at teaching learners to work with illustrations, and other activities.

The activity types in the textbook are as follows: ‘listen’, ‘working with the text’, ‘after reading’, and ‘what do you think’, as well as one instance of ‘what next’, which entails discussion in pairs. ‘Listen’ is mostly listening comprehension activities, but may also include pair or group work, such as discussions. ‘Working with the text’ involves for example searching for specific features in the text, reading the text out loud with a partner, and discussing a related topic. ‘After reading’ consists of questions regarding the content of the texts, and may also include pair or group work, or presentations. Almost all instances of ‘what do you think’ appear together with the ‘picture this’ activities, and involve reflecting on one’s own opinions either independently or in pairs or groups. At the end of the book, there are vocabulary lists for those texts that were excerpts from

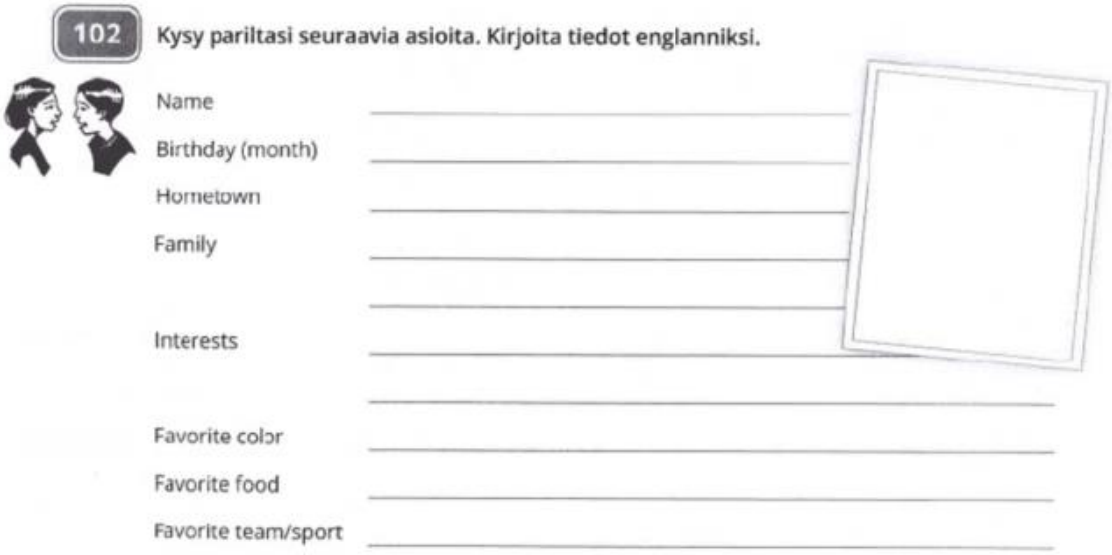
books by Stephen King and Rudyard Kipling. There is also a list of the general objectives of learning English, as well as advice on how learners can improve their learning.

The workbook is divided into two parts, the first relating to the textbook, while the second focuses on grammar. The first part consists of the following activity types: ‘listening’, ‘now you’re talking’, ‘check your reading’, ‘vocabulary’, ‘now you’re writing’. In addition to these, the workbook also contains a few translation activities as well as ‘finding facts and information’. ‘Listening’ and ‘vocabulary’ naturally entail listening comprehension and practicing vocabulary, and do not require pair or group work. ‘Now you’re talking’ consists of two parts: the first part is individual work, for example familiarizing oneself with the vocabulary needed in the second part, which provides discussion activities on topics relating to the textbook units, themes and vocabulary. ‘Now you’re writing’ consists of translation and writing activities, which may be done individually, or in pairs or groups. ‘Check your reading’ includes questions relating to the content of the textbook texts.

The activities in the grammar section require only individual work. Most of the activities are fill-in-the-blank activities, some consist of writing and translation activities. The workbook also makes use of illustrations which indicate what the activity requires of the learner. For example, a hippo with a textbook next to its head indicates a vocabulary activity, whereas one with headphones marks a listening activity. Two hippos dancing together marks a ‘fun and games’ activity, and a hippo skimming through the pages of a book indicates a ‘finding facts and information activity’. A star marks a more challenging activity, and a picture of a piece paper denotes the use of a worksheet.

Appendix 2: The tasks that were analyzed in table 2

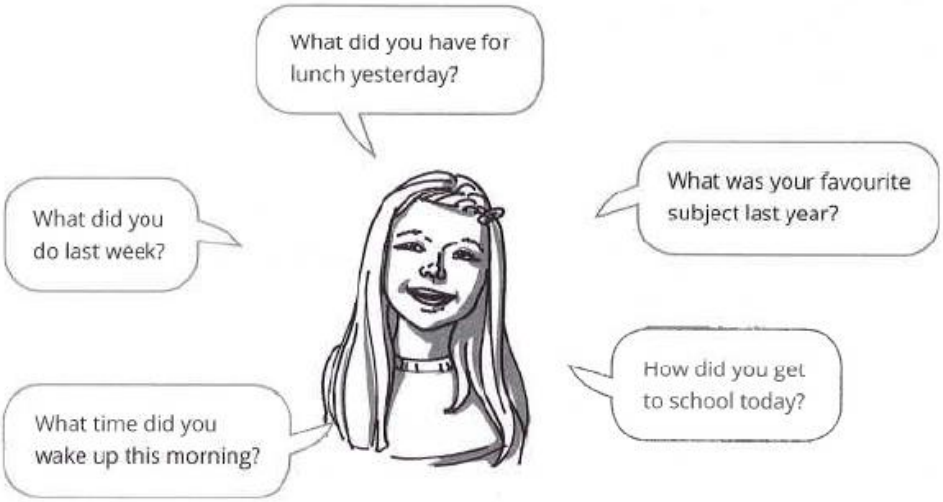
OG.w.102 – On the Go 1, workbook, activity 102



OG.w.104 – On the Go 1, workbook, activity 104

OG.w.127 – On the Go 1, workbook, activity 127

127 Haastattele pariasi.



Appendix 3: The macro code used in the analysis

```
Option Explicit

Dim q, p, n, m, k, i, j As Integer
Dim test As Boolean
Dim test2 As Boolean
Dim numcol As Integer
Dim laskin As Integer
Dim remcal As Integer
Dim remrem As Integer

Dim minuscol() As Variant
Dim arr1(25) As Variant
Dim arr2(25) As Variant

Sub vertailu()

remrem = 0
remcal = 0
n = 1
Sheets("erottaja").Activate
numcol = Range("A2", Range("A2").End(xlToRight)).Columns.Count
laskin = 1
```

```
ReDim minuscol(numcol)
'liikuttaa vertailijaa
For m = 1 To numcol



'liikuttaa verrattavaa
For k = 1 To numcol - m

    'asettaa arrit
    For j = 0 To 24
    arr1(j) = Cells(2 + j, m).Value
    arr2(j) = Cells(2 + j, k + m).Value
    Next j

    'testaa yhteläisyyden
    test = True
       For i = LBound(arr1) To UBound(arr1)
          If arr1(i) <> arr2(i) Then
          test = False
          Exit For
       End If
       Next i
    If test = True Then
    laskin = laskin + 1
          'muisti
          test2 = True
             For p = 1 To remrem
                If minuscol(p) = k + m Then
                test2 = False
                Exit For
                End If
             Next p
```

```
            If test2 = True Then
               remrem = remrem + 1
               minuscol(remrem) = k + m
            End If
      End If

Next k

'asettaa laskimen
Cells(2, m).Offset(35, 0).Value = laskin
laskin = 1

Next m

'poistaa column

For n = 1 To UBound(minuscol)
   For q = 1 To UBound(minuscol)
   If minuscol(n) < minuscol(q) Then
   minuscol(q) = minuscol(q) - 1
   End If
   Next q
Cells(2, minuscol(n)).EntireColumn.Select
Selection.Delete
Next n


End Sub
```